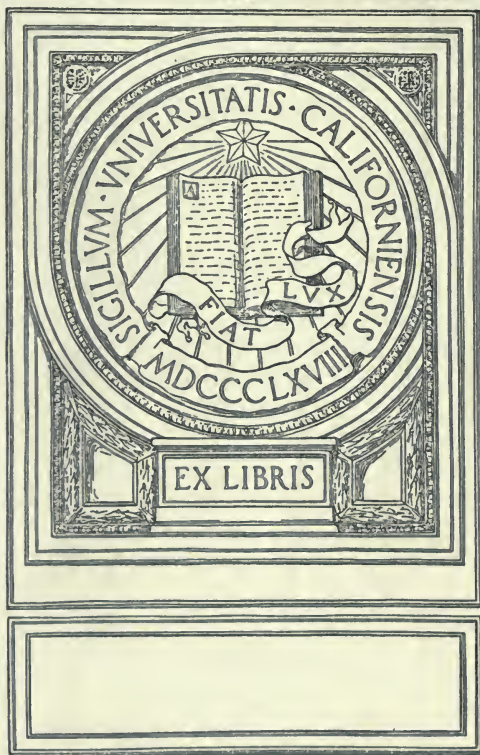




GIFT OF  
PROFESSOR C. A. KOFOLD













# DAYS OF DISCOVERY



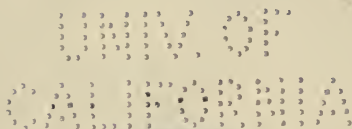
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# DAYS OF DISCOVERY

BY

BERTRAM SMITH

AUTHOR OF "THE WHOLE ART OF CARAVANNING," ETC.



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GIFT OF

PROFESSOR C. A. KOFOID

WITH few exceptions the contents of this book have appeared in the pages of *The Manchester Guardian*. Those entitled "Pains and Penalties," "Making Money," "Opprobrious Epithets," and "A Dinner Party" came out in the *Saturday Review*, while "The Mystic Gulf" is from the *Spectator*. My thanks are due to the Editors of these three Journals for permission to republish.

B. S.

TO MRU  
AIRBORNE

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# *Days of Discovery*

## I

### *THE BARBARIAN*

THOUGH civilization and convention may rule the rest of the household with an iron hand, their sway stops short upon the threshold of the nursery, for the upbringing and development of a small boy are comparable to the progress of the race from the chaos of dark ages to the ordered existence of to-day. In the long run he must adapt himself to the conditions that obtain, he must leave behind his war-paint and the primitive habits and customs of his tribe and clothe himself and learn to behave ; and the day comes when he must begin to calculate, to consider and to look ahead. But for the years when he is still able to hold his own against the forces that are to shape his course he has many things in common with certain kindred souls

in virgin forest where the white man is unknown. Such are his attitude towards the Ordeal of Battle, which he accepts as fitting and straightforward—his willing agreement with the principle that might is right ; his faculty not indeed for worshipping but at least for endowing with human attributes all manner of inanimate objects—ships, locomotives and the like. I well remember a time when an Atlantic liner was quite as much alive to me as an elephant and had a much more striking personality. How could one read the thoughts or imagine the sensations of an elephant? But one knew very well what a ship felt like as she moved among the lesser craft with a slow and easy swagger up the tideway or dragged tired limbs to dock after a stormy crossing.

I am told—I had myself forgotten it ; it is the sort of thing one does forget—that I was presented at an early age to a fellow-pupil for the first time. We shook hands, under pressure, and as soon as we were left alone, “ I’m bigger than you,” said I. “ Yes,” said he, “ but I can knock you down ”—which he did. That is essentially a prehistoric form of introduction. We could not have been expected to settle down

to any friendly relation until it had been demonstrated which of us was the better man.

Many other savage customs flourish in the nursery—slavery most obviously, unless it be put down by a superior power. Strangest of all is that callous and barbaric cruelty which seems to crop up sporadically in boys by no means heartless or unfeeling. Once let him get his enemy in his power and a boy will often distress Those in Authority and even amaze himself, when he comes to reflect upon it, by an action of instinctive brutality. Archie, my younger brother, had been climbing for a missel-thrush's nest in the old holm oak on the lawn and had slipped and fallen off a branch and come to rest head downwards in an evil predicament. I had answered his breathless yell for assistance. "Get hold of my legs," shouted Archie. I surveyed him for a moment and then (flying in the very face of our common humanity), "Will you lend me your paint-box?" I demanded calmly. "Be quick!" panted Archie. "Will you lend me your paint-box?" said I. I do not know what would have been the end of it, for Archie was getting very red in the face, had not one of Those in Authority also heard the call for help. One might almost

contemplate with despair this little monster who was capable, in the presence of helplessness and urgent need, of quietly taking his stand with his hands in his pockets and propounding his unholy bargain. But the paint-box was at the time a sore point between us and why should I give away chances? Had the bargain been completed, the paint-box lent and the sufferer rescued I don't think the incident would have disturbed the friendly relations between the contracting parties. Archie was fairly had: he must have seen that.

The boy maintains the same primitive and barbaric attitude in his dealings with the Goddess of Fortune, his traffic with luck and chances. Luck is a vital element in his life: he is surrounded by unseen forces, ordering and controlling the events of every day. It is an unshaken faith in his luck that supplies the motive power in half his escapades. Whether he be trying to capture blackbirds with Old John Gardener's riddle and a string, or fishing for tadpoles in the pit, or dodging callers, or hoping he is not late for tea—it is his luck that counts. There is a special virtue in it. One of his purest delights is in finding things—not, of course, things that he



has lost but things that have been lost by other people. In this he will display great patience and ingenuity ; and a knife encountered in the street, a pencil, or best of all a coin, has for him a special significance far beyond its face value. He will treasure it with splendid exultation, proud beyond words of his luck.

He dearly loves taking chances. In his fine craving for the whole flavour and intensity of existence he must have his fill of surprises, of startling incidents, of risks. But he does not gamble, as do those of riper years, in any hope of gain ; generally speaking he has everything to lose. Rather is his the attitude of the savage who will stake his head upon a wager. In truth he is often nearer to staking his head than he realizes and many of us can look back upon dizzy and insensate adventures undertaken for no better reason than that we were "dared to do it." There was a rotten old line of trellis surmounting a high wall and accessible from the bathroom window, where in days of long ago valuable lives might more than once have been lost in no better cause than this. Any precarious pathway, any break-neck climb, any dangerous and forbidden neighbourhood was in itself an invitation to adventure.

But the risk to life and limb was not the only fruit of this one-sided gambling spirit. One had a passion for the Ordeal in divers forms. One was continually subjecting oneself to meaningless tests, pitting oneself against all manner of invisible antagonists. One would throw one's whole soul into the endeavour to peel off a stocking while standing on one leg. One would freely bind oneself not to open one's eyes in the morning till one had groped one's way to the bathroom. And if success crowned these earnest performances one was not without a solid sense of achievement, whereas if they failed it meant bad luck.

Perhaps these eccentricities carried us further than is usual, for ours was a nursery full of boys and my little sister alone represented the tempering influence of a wiser, saner sex. But it was ever thus. Luck played a part in every transaction. Nothing could be well decided without tossing up or drawing lots. And for myself I loved to consult by occult means a vague and arbitrary oracle. I would tell myself that if the number of flies upon the ceiling was divisible by seven we should have a fine day for our picnic ; if I could hit a certain tree with a certain stone I

might not after all be kept in for neglected sums ; if the first man I met had on brown boots I should be in time for my train. Indeed I must have lived in a world of dark and pagan superstition of my own creation ; and at the same time I maintained a swaggering attitude, towards the stock superstitions, of adamant superiority and smiling scorn. I looked down with amazement and despair upon the intellectual level of the old woman in the ice-cream shop who drew down the blind lest she see the first of the new moon through glass. I regarded it as a duty, a special mission to fly in the face of all such impious beliefs. I would spill salt with much bravado, cross knives ostentatiously, to the horror of the under-nurse. I would go far out of my way, insolently whistling, to walk beneath a ladder ; and if I could count thirteen at table gleefully proclaimed the fact and had no mercy on the fearful.

Seventeen was ever my lucky number : I think it still is. In a multitude of ways I drew from it comfort and support. Were I loth to get out of bed I would search the room for seventeen units that would bring the needed stimulus. Seventeen rings on a curtain or books on a shelf would

do. And I would start the day the better for them. Many of the decisive actions of my life were timed to the seventeenth tick of a clock, the seventeenth swing of a hammock or quack of a duck. . . .

I am afraid you may have found me out. It is true that the small boy whose doings, fancies and confessions fill these pages was at no time an attractive child. But for my part I sympathize with him still and when I look back across the great Dividing Line to the glowing, teeming world in which he lived, I am well content to know that he made the most of it and need not now reproach himself with wasted opportunities.



## II

### *OFFENSIVE WEAPONS*

EACH had its use—the Bow and Arrow, the Catapult, the Pea Shooter, the Squirt—and each its period of exclusive popularity.

The Catapult perhaps hardly deserves to be regarded as an effective member of the group. We approached it with awe and looked forward to it with hope, as being rather the proper weapon of the schoolboy. To us it was more a magnificent possession, a treasure, than a practical implement—a thing to husband closely in the pocket, where the hand at any moment might grip it lovingly, to be taken out on fitting occasions and flicked nonchalantly about by way of showing off: whose handle could be bound and rebound at short intervals with whipcord, whose elasticity was subject of frequent test and trial. One would have been very sorry to have been without a catapult, but if the whole truth must be divulged one was more than a little chary of actually

letting it off. One had hit one's thumb more than once at that game.

The Bow and Arrow had a considerable vogue. We were all Robin Hoods then. Very soon we threw over the accepted types, which could be bought in shops, as lacking true romance. A bow was one of the many things (like walking-sticks, stilts and, of course, catapults) that no shop-keeper had ever understood. We cut our own—of trusty yew. Nor had we any opinion at all of smooth, sleek, be-feathered arrows. We must make our own—always with the aid of Old John Gardener—securely tipped with lead, and laboriously scrubbed with sandpaper. We would rejoice greatly—as would not have been possible in the case of a mere shop arrow—in the exploit of the champion shaft of the hour, till such time as he was lost to us in some prodigious flight. Yet we never had the fullest satisfaction from bows and arrows, for they were subject to confining regulation and restriction. Ever since the day when Archie (who was only trying the effect of a new bow-string in the nursery) let fly an arrow inadvertently across the room, narrowly escaping homicide and transfixing the picture of General Gordon which hung upon the wall:—

ever since that unlucky day bows and arrows were accounted too dangerous for promiscuous use. They had their allotted seasons, their fixed occasions, even their prescribed lines of flight. There was, in a word, altogether too much red tape about the Bow and Arrow.

In striking contrast was the position of the Pea Shooter, which was essentially without a trace of official recognition. It was never allowed to become conspicuous enough to be subject to any such hampering restrictions. It was the weapon of stealth, the weapon of the sharp-shooter taking "pot-shots" (which was the term then in vogue) from a point of safe seclusion. It was responsible for a vast amount of fine guerilla warfare. Its office was to "pepper" and annoy : to plant a well-directed pea in the heart of a group of callers from the hidden branches of a neighbouring tree : or rake the serried ranks of the girls' school next door when they walked out to take the air. Naturally it was subject to frequent confiscation. But a new one was not far to seek. It could be cut at any time from the elderberry bush in the shrubbery ; the pith ejected with a knitting needle ; the finished weapon dried and seasoned and ready for work within the day.

But, while I would not for a moment be ungrateful to the memory of these others, it was the Squirt that really counted. For all offensive tactics a jet of water is incomparably better than a pea, in the thrilling act of nervous pressure with which it is driven forth, softly hissing on its way, in a certain unfailing humour, not easy to explain, which belongs to it, and in the fact that it leaves its mark behind and the victim cannot deny that he was struck. Oh, yes, squirts were the great stand-by. They were seldom altogether idle for a day, for one carried one's squirt quite as a matter of course as a man may carry a penknife or a watch. And indeed a squirt of the true orthodox type (for this was one of the things that the shops did understand) with its long, cylindrical barrel and sharply tapered nose of smooth, unbattered lead is truly a delightful object. Even the garden syringe, although far more tremendous in its effects (and additionally desirable because it was prohibited) could not seriously compete with the massive and effective tenpenny squirt or even with the slender little threepenny model, so handy for quiet and unobtrusive attack.

The Squirt, in addition to a thousand other

obvious activities, was the chosen weapon of the Duel. Behold the two combatants face to face, at a distance of perhaps four feet, each kneeling in front of his basin of water, each closely enwrapped in a mackintosh, each delivering at the word of command from the referee destructive streams at his opponent's features. It was often hard to judge, when the ammunition was exhausted, who had proved the victor. Both had shared in the sheer intoxication of the fray. Both were blinded, saturated and bedraggled, and one need ask no more than that.

And one day a wicked whisper came to me—the outcome of that restless desire with which we were so often possessed to try to improve upon a good thing. *Must it be water?* Why should it be water? It was to that diabolical suggestion that I owe the treasured memory of an evening on which I really tasted power. Open rebellion was not new to me, nor occasions of reckless defiance. One had defied authority by running away. But to defy authority in hand-to-hand conflict!—it was by all odds a grander moment. Our true parents and guardians were away from home and an uncle and aunt were in charge on the evening when I suddenly stampeded, threw off all restraint



and with my new Tenpenny charged with ink boldly faced the world. Seated astride the high end of the sofa with my back to the wall I blankly refused to go to bed, meeting all advances with the blackened end of my lethal weapon—"Another step and I fire!" Gradually it dawned upon me what an overwhelmingly strong position was mine, quite as good in its way as any anarchist who turns at bay with a revolver. By the expenditure of a few drops—which left their mark in a dotted line upon the carpet for years to come—I made it clear to all that I meant what I said. And they cowered before me and drew back. It was one of those occasions when "they could do nothing with me." The uncle and aunt must be sent for; and it was a most fortunate circumstance that they were on the point of going out to dine and therefore quite exceptionally vulnerable to a point-blank jet of ink. My blood was up: words were of no avail. No, I was not going to bed, as a matter of fact I was not going to bed for hours, I was simply going to sit where I was. And one step forward——. Thus I held them through some heady minutes of dizzy triumph, while my allies looked on admiring, almost worshipping. I was about to

formulate further terms when the fray ended, prematurely as it seemed to me, in a sudden rush, behind cover of an umbrella in which I was borne down, captured and disarmed.

But my weapon was empty ere I relinquished it. I had left my mark.

### III

#### *OPPROBRIOUS EPITHETS*

It was in the early age of more active and vigorous rebellion, before one had begun to see the advantages of bowing to the storm, and trying to reach one's ends by subtler means, that sheer terms of abuse bulked largely in our vocabulary. In truth I think we must have been a desperate team to drive. When I remember the ever-present resentment with which we regarded all necessary instructions, and still more the lurid terms in which it was expressed, I am inclined to marvel at the whole-hearted and thorough-going methods of the barbarous age of boyhood. The under-nurse of the moment was one's prime adversary. Only at times of overpowering exasperation did one turn upon the head nurse, and one was apt to regret it afterwards, for she had "a way with her" that somehow lifted her above the level of attack. But each new under-nurse must be made to feel at the outset that you



would go to bed when it suited your convenience and not before, that you would come out of your bath when in your opinion the proper moment had arrived, and your exit would not be hastened by any new method she might adopt of holding an expectant towel. She would drive you forth of course after a time—having first of all counted twenty, then fifty, and then a hundred without result—by application of the cold tap ; but then you told her what you thought of her.

Swearing was known to be one of the most deadly sins, and therefore held in awe. That was forbidden ground on which one would never dare to trespass. But a difficulty was continually arising as to the definition of what *was* swearing. It was a subject frequently and earnestly debated, especially when a splendid new word or expression had become our common property. Was it swearing? The trouble was that it was no use going for information to Grown-up Persons, who alone would be likely to know, for one would be told that whether it was swearing or not it was “not at all a nice word for us to use”—which wasn’t the point. For if it was not swearing it was a sinful waste not to use it. Thus in our wordy warfare, when one or other of the com-

batants had stepped beyond the usual range and employed an expression of a higher flavour than was customary, his opponent had only to say "That's swearing" to pull him up at once. It was equivalent to telling him that he wasn't playing the game. Upon which he would of course deny it, and then the original point in dispute was happily forgotten in the interesting investigation which followed. The disputed word must be submitted to a committee of experts and we would solemnly make up our minds whether it was admissible or no. But if it was adjudged by common consent to be outside the legitimate list of expressions, its user needed no condemnation from his fellows. He would suffer from an inward remorse at the thought of the dreadful thing that he had done, howbeit all unwittingly. In truth we kept remarkably on the safe side. In the absence of an authoritative statement we were careful to draw the line in such a way that there could be no possibility of error.

One by one words lost their force and flavour by lavish repetition. I can see now that we squandered them too freely. One was far too much given to firing off the best word in all one's

armoury upon a trivial occasion, instead of waiting for a situation worthy of it, where it might be expected to tell with effect. There was of course a certain element of competition which was largely responsible for this prodigality, for I must get the best words in before my adversary had thought of them. He could not possibly retaliate in the same terms. And so, when times were dull, and no new material had been found for long, one must go on using outworn phrases with a sort of persistent weariness. There were even occasions when one became almost courteous and restrained in one's conversation for want of new matter. Words also, as a rule, worked down from the higher level to the lower in the course of their brief activity. They were generally introduced by the older members, who would bring them into play with great effect at first. But when they were taken up by those below their original authors repudiated them after a while. Till in their last most lowly estate they came to be lisped by my little sister in her rare moments of asperity.

This was the fate of "Cad" and "Lunatic." "Outsider" had a brief and brilliant run. "Rotter" was enormously popular, and even re-

curred, after its first long innings, in several vigorous revivals, so hardly did we come to part with it. But there was, as far as I remember, no more dramatic moment than the introduction of "Blighter," used with startling effect by Sidney, my eldest brother, on the occasion of an altercation as to who it was who had first seen a found penny on the road. Even the penny was forgotten in the general rejoicing at this magnificent acquisition. But its course was brief. A strong suspicion grew up that it was swearing : and though it was upon the tip of one's tongue a thousand times thereafter, it was never again hurled forth in all its glory. "Half-wit" was invented or discovered by myself, and in consequence I always had a peculiar weakness for it. Perhaps I have still. It was not, like so many of its compeers, adapted to a sudden shout of anger. But it could be driven home with enormous effect by the hammer of a scathing scorn.

Then there were the various places that you could be told to go to. So valuable was this form, in the traffic of everyday intercourse, that it was never wholly allowed to drop, although the victim's destination was continually being altered and revised. The difficulty was to handle it



without encroaching upon the forbidden territory of swearing, for there are places that one is told to go to, even in after life, that had to be avoided. But you were freely told to go to Jericho or to go to Portobello. Best of all you could be told to go to Blazes—which, by the way, was felt to be sailing very near the wind.

The entire traffic in abuse had thus its artistic side, which perhaps did something to redeem it. It was not enough to revile in any terms that came to hand. They must be fresh and vigorous or they went for nothing. One had perhaps picked up a brand-new insult from a book or in a tramway car and one would dwell upon it earnestly in private, trying to assess its value, to foresee its effect. The moment came at last when it was launched into the world, not without some nervousness. For its author must watch its effect in two separate directions. First upon his opponent—would it make him squirm? Secondly upon the company at large—would it be received, admired, adopted? The latter was much the more important question. If it was introduced by a younger brother especially, he would await the issue with anxiety. And were he to hear it later on upon the lips of an elder,

with what fine pride would he reflect that it was his !

I had been out to tea—surely it must have been very early in my criminal career—and there had heard a new and glorious word, splendidly adapted, so it seemed to me, for use on the new under-nurse. But when I was taken off to bed—obviously the proper moment for its first appearance—I could by no means remember it ! Long and deeply did I ponder, during the process of undressing and in my bath. It was not “Beast” and yet it was allied to “Beast.” I was so “good” that night that not even twenty had to be counted ere I gave myself up to the towel. But the truth was I was deep in thought, trying with all my powers to recapture my lost treasure. I had reached the night nursery before it came to me. I was in the very act of being congratulated upon my model behaviour. There could have been no more dramatic moment to test its quality. I sprang across the room, turned upon my unfortunate conductor.

“You Brute !” I shouted and tumbled into bed.

#### IV

### *REVENGE*

GENERALLY speaking, one grew out of one's enmities and animosities even more rapidly than one grew out of one's clothes. There was no doubt a time when if strained relations existed between two of us we attacked each other at sight (remembering the guiding principle that if you scratched you left your mark, but if you pinched there was no evidence against you). But at least we did not harbour and maintain our enmity. Even in the event of that most terrible and desolating tragedy of childhood, a miscarriage of justice, our dark fury against the oppressor did not long survive. Retaliation must follow very quickly or not at all. But there would be some hours of bitter resentment all the same. For one made no allowances: the bald and naked truth stood out in all its hideous enormity. One had a terrible, uncompromising sense of justice in those days. There was, I am

sure, no calamity which could so darken the whole aspect of existence as to be punished for something which one had not done. Then one sought some distant solitude—by preference an actively uncomfortable one—and there brooded upon one's wrongs and let them rankle deep. At first one felt that it was just no use going on at all, in the face of this sort of thing. One supposed one would have to run away—it would be a great bore—one had after all been very happy here, until this happened, and the outside world was by repute inclement. But what could one do? It was no use trying to go on as if nothing had happened. The next phase, so far as I can recall it, was that in which one pondered upon the attractions of "making them sorry," not by any aggressive action on one's own part, but by some noble example of silent suffering, patiently borne. Suppose that one did run away and met with a cab accident at the very door (it would have to happen in the earliest stages): suppose one were carried in, limp and pale, and deposited upon the dining-room table (one would occupy the centre of the stage much more effectively there than on a mere bed). *Then* they would be sorry. Suppose one were to starve oneself to death,



calmly and without a tear? That would give them more time to relent. Or it might even be possible to go one better than that. If one were to lose one's life in saving Archie from drowning, and they only found out afterwards that it really had been Archie who had done it—who had, that is, turned on the taps in the bathroom and left them running? I think we may safely say that they would be sorry then. . . . There was the tea bell! One could afford to laugh, harshly, cynically at that summons. It would be ridiculous and impossible to appear at tea before one had made up one's mind as to whether one was going to starve or not. And the room was getting dark. All the better: that was quite in the picture. It wanted that to furnish the completed situation of the shivering outcast. . . . But one was hungry—beastly hungry. And, however much one might set one's teeth and hold on to it by might and main, the shadow was already lifting. Other thoughts would insist upon intruding themselves, all sorts of jolly little suggestions kept cropping up. One *had* intended, before all this happened, to spend the evening finishing that kite. If it hadn't been for this, one would have had to make up one's mind

whether to paint it red or green. If this had been an ordinary day, with no great catastrophe to upset it, one might have added another four feet to the tail of it. And to-morrow was a half-holiday, and there was every prospect of a good wind. And . . .

It was no use. It had been very fine in its way—a noble and profound experience, but it was quite impossible to keep it up. Hilarious voices in the distance completed the cure. What did it all matter after all?

It was only in the very earliest stages while the injury was still fresh, before the long train of beautiful and melancholy reflection set in, that one admitted projects of revenge. If any opportunity occurred then for hitting back with effect it would be recklessly accepted.

It must be said that miscarriages of justice were of the rarest occurrence—so rare indeed that one remembers most of them even now. But I remember best of all the affair of the tennis court, because that was the one occasion on which I may be said to have scored.

There was to be a tennis party, actually the first tennis party—for the court had only been constructed during the previous winter. Pre-

parations were afoot and the nursery was in a state of keen excitement. The greatest event was the production by Old John Gardener of a fascinating new machine, which was pushed by two handles up and down the lawn, leaving behind it a white track or trail. We watched him with the utmost glee marking the lines. Perhaps we had pestered the old man even more than usual: anyway he began to show signs of a ruffled temper, and when he found the string of the net in a hopeless state of entanglement he seized me by the scruff of the neck and marched me into the house for judgment. The plain truth was that I had not done it but in the general bustle and confusion sentence was passed without a proper hearing (all that I wanted was a fair enquiry) and I found myself condemned to spend the next half-hour on a chair far from the scene of action, and alone. I was fortunately able to secure a chair that was near a window that commanded the lawn. There I sat indulging in immense hatred against Those in Authority, against old John, against tennis parties and tennis, and all that had contributed to my predicament. Suddenly an exquisite idea came to me. I saw how by one fell blow I could spoil it all. The

preparations were completed before my time was up : in twenty minutes the guests were due to arrive, and the lawn was deserted. If I could only have the run of the garden till they came !

I stole downstairs and made my way to the tap at the corner of the house, where (as I had hoped) the marking machine was lying, also a bucket of whiting. I rolled up my sleeves and went vigorously to work. First of all I made a trifling addition to the court on the near side : after that I threw out a sort of wing or annex to the opposite court. Then I added a beautiful semicircular bulge beside the net. Next I tried to work in my own initials, but failed, and hastened back to the tap for further supplies. Then I put in two diagonals and again filled up my reservoir. And finally I embarked upon a perfect riot of delineation till the court presented a magnificent tangle of white lines, wholly barbarous and unmeaning.

I might very well have stopped there, but the house was silent, the French window was open and my blood was up. . . .

I found a final refuge in the shrubbery, from which I could watch events. Already I heard the first arrivals at the front door. There they

came round the corner of the house in smiling, affable groups (little they knew what was in store for them !) dressed in elegant white flannels and light summer dresses. Nearly every one had a racquet (they might as well have left those at home !) and here was one who carried a box of balls. Deeply did I enjoy the emotions with which they viewed my handiwork. (They will have something to punish me for this time !) It was a pretty awkward situation of course for Those in Authority : it was pretty humiliating for Old John Gardener : but it must have been the purest joy for my allies from the nursery who had by now begun to appear. And in the end I was dragged forth, a little, dirty, white-bespattered object, and set face to face with that elegant, disconcerted, disappointed throng—to explain myself.

But that wasn't all. Let them wait till they saw the drawing-room carpet !



# V

## *THE MYSTIC GULF*

THERE was nothing in the old garden that appealed to us as children more than its Eastern boundary. The great twelve-foot wall was the home and centre of all manner of queer occupations and pursuits. It was broadly coped with freestone and massively clothed with ancient ivy for the greater part of its course, and the top of it, obscured by the luxuriant leaves and scored across by hidden branches, formed a sort of adventurous and rather wobbly causeway where one might crawl on hands and knees looking down upon the world beneath. The view at the lower end was magnificent, extending even to the Green-Hill-Far-Away on the common, and at its greater altitude the dizzy track ran in among the trees, so that one found oneself perched in a close neighbourhood of impenetrable greenery on the near side. On the far side, not more than two feet beyond the wall, rose the stable of the

adjoining house, like a cliff, to the gutters where the sparrows dwelt far overhead. Hoisting oneself up by the roof of the potting-shed at the bottom end one made one's way along the summit, always scaling new altitudes, for the wall rose here and there in sharp curves. And thus one might practise the reckless sport of dropping from it, adding to the height by regular gradations, and adding at the same time to the tingling sensation of "pins-and-needles" that characterized the moment when one struck the ground. And there were often sparrows' nests in the ivy, and lost tennis balls. And there was a point from which one could look through the roof of the conservatory and run little stones down it, tinkling over the glass. But the highest use to which the old wall was put was as a vantage ground from which to fish in the Mystic Gulf—the narrow strip of ground that had been left stranded between the two walls when the stable of the Old Gentleman's House next door was built. It was deep and dank as any dungeon and splendidly mysterious, and from the very nature of its confined and narrow space it was quite untrodden by the foot of man. I suppose it was for that very reason that the Mystic Gulf



boasted so rich a deposit of useless odds and ends among the rough stones and broken slates that formed its main contents.

It so happened that the dining-room curtains at that time were supported by strong brass hooks, which could be reached with a gingerly outstretched arm from the top of the sideboard, and these served the purpose admirably. It required delicate manipulation to control them at the end of their swaying line, and some patience and no little skill were called for in feeling one's way to a point that was capable of admitting the hook. For it would mumble impotently about the smooth surface of tin cans, and the old umbrella-stick that was one of our most coveted prizes could with difficulty be raised more than a few inches from the ground. But we laboured with a whole-hearted devotion quite out of proportion to the importance of the cause, and the museum of relics which we had established in the summer-house added daily to the number of its specimens.

As time went on innovations were introduced. We would let down a lighted candle into the darkest recesses; two anglers would work in concert, attacking the umbrella-stick one at each

end and trying to lift it with a perfect balance at the same moment. For as we became by degrees skilled exponents of the sport we despised the more obvious prizes. There was no satisfaction in fishing up a broken fire-guard, for instance, or the remnant of a wicker basket. These were too palpably hookable. It was to the most serious problems that we turned longing eyes—the orange, the watering-pot, the twisted poker. It became a common practice to dedicate oneself for the afternoon to one of these, the baffling and the unattainable. “I am out for the poker to-day,” one would announce, and until the tea-bell rang one would suffer no distraction from this stern endeavour. It was comfort enough to have had a bite—that is to say, to have perceptibly lifted the quarry clear of the ground.

It was Colin, my second brother, who brought home the orange in an impressive scene, during which it was placed with elaborate musical honours in the forefront of the museum. He had discarded his hook and line, and borrowing a long pole from the bleaching green had fitted it with a stout point of wire. With this he had skilfully run the orange to ground in a corner of

the wall, speared it and brought it up. The pole was afterwards found useful for stirring up and altering the position of other objects so as to make them more amenable to attack.

And then there came a day when our long practice was put to good account, and we were able to save ourselves from a desperate situation by our familiarity with the art. For it was the season of sparrows' nests, and we had found one in the waterpipe that ran up the wall beyond. It was so placed that one could positively see the eggs by climbing and holding on in a dangerous and distorted position, and yet the opening was so small that they were not to be reached. But could they not be ladled out with a spoon? With a beautiful disregard for the value of property a small antique silver spoon was brought forthwith from the cabinet in the drawing-room, applied by an eager and unsteady hand, and dropped into the Mystic Gulf!

Here was indeed something to fish for. Here was a new element of urgency, of overwhelming gravity introduced into the sport. Here was a sufficient cause to put us on our mettle. The candle, on being lowered, revealed the quarry lying well in an open space. But we recognised

with dismay that nothing is less vulnerable to hook or spear than a small silver spoon. And yet we triumphed. For my own inherent love of all that is sticky prompted me to a brilliant rescue. At the very moment of the ringing of the tea-bell that was to seal our fate, and in the centre of a thrilled, expectant group, holding back the ivy, I let down a tethered tennis ball smeared lavishly with birdlime. It descended with perfect precision, and I allowed it to settle for a moment upon its prey before I drew it triumphantly to the surface. The only untoward outcome of the incident was an unmerited reproof to the housemaid for neglecting to keep the silver clean.

After that the tennis ball became for a time the favourite bait. It would roam about the horrid depths gathering an unsavoury cargo of paper, pieces of cloth, or anything else of a readily adhesive nature. These were not admitted to the museum, but they were carefully subjected to examination before they were destroyed. For we had a wonderful faith in the possibilities of our Gulf, and it seemed not at all unlikely that one might strike a bank-note or a cheque. Such things did happen !

But the Gulf became exhausted. Even the umbrella-stick and the watering-pot had been retrieved, and the poker had been given up as hopeless. It was necessary to re-stock our waters. It was thus that the custom grew up of casting in all manner of goods and chattels for the sake of fishing them up again. At first they were of no value, and were selected solely for their fishable properties, but we were not satisfied with that. A sort of sinister competition grew up between us in flinging in our most treasured belongings. The climax was reached upon a dreadful day when we all set to work to outbid each other in a reckless display of wanton and courageous sacrifice. The nursery cupboard was cleared out, private drawers were searched and rifled, and a great bale of miscellaneous property was hauled to the top of the wall—books, knives, paint-boxes, a telescope, a tennis racquet, and many other treasures. All were cast recklessly into the depths, and we peered down at them with quaking hearts and faced the task before us.

I doubt not that all would have ended well had it not been for the thunderstorm. As it was, our salvage operations were carried out two



days later in the spirit of dark and dogged bitterness of those who must save what they can from the wreck.

And we fished no more in the Mystic Gulf.



## VI

### *THE ORDEAL*

THE adventure of the Mystic Gulf was by no means the only occasion on which we engaged in sinister speculations and subjected our dearest belongings to the Ordeal in divers forms. This strange necessity by which one's goods must go forth to seek their fortune, as it were, led us into the queerest transactions. It was not that we were for a moment indifferent to our property. Rather we clung to it with a burning desire. It was terrible to lose it in some reckless enterprise, though even then one had a feeling that it had been sacrificed in a good cause. But there is no question that it had an added value and a new prestige when it had tempted Providence and been gloriously retrieved.

I have freighted a toy boat with all my worldly wealth in pennies and pushed it forth, with a pang, from the edge of the pit. I have listened at night with a quaking heart to the rain upon the window, conscious that my new bow and

arrow were lying unprotected in an angle of the roof to which I had surreptitiously conveyed them. I have buried my new jack-knife in the shrubbery. And, best of all, I have left in the box that held the books in the family pew at church a real stylographic pen for a whole week, setting forth to the morning service when the term was over, with quite unusual alacrity. It was splendid to pass the church on a week-day when it was deserted and locked up, hugging the private knowledge that there was a stylographic pen in there—a thing that no one would have dreamt of for a moment.

Those in Authority did not understand this attitude at all. We were not fit, it appeared to them, we were not old enough to have such things as stylographic pens and jack-knives if we valued them so little. But that was a colossal misjudgment of the case. It was just because we valued them, just because they were the best and dearest that we had that they must face the Ordeal. It was when Archie and I were given watches for the first time that we had to submit to the gravest indignities in this connection—had even to hear a favourite uncle blamed for his unthinking generosity. And yet I am con-

vinced that no one ever loved a watch more passionately than I loved mine. Admittedly it was a little difficult for Grown-ups to understand, but at the time it appealed to us as a worthy and necessary test. We were discovered seated on the bank above the lawn, throwing our watches across the turf, and increasing the distance after every round. Even now I recall the thrill with which one cast them in the air ; the dreadful thud with which they dropped among the daisies, striking terror to the owner's heart. One of Those in Authority intervened, searching questions were asked, confiscation even was contemplated. It was not the sort of thing that is easily explained, but we confessed the truth at last, resentfully and in no expectation of sympathetic judgment. We were simply finding out which of us could throw his watch furthest without stopping it. That was all. We never meant to break them. But did we recognize the risk? *Of course* we recognized the risk. The risk was the reason, the motive, the heart of the whole affair. As well throw turnips if there had been no risk. We had to promise not to repeat the experiment, and I have always regretted that the thing was never fought to a finish.

Archie and I went to school at that time—in the forenoons only—to a house a mile and a half off, down a narrow lane running out into the country. An old wall in a state of senile decay ran down one side of it, and on the other was a hedge with trees here and there, notably a vast hollow oak. So that the whole course may be said to have been rich in crevices and holes. One day Archie with much bravado dropped his knife into one of them on the way to school and recovered it on his return. From that moment the new game had begun—the game of depositing a variety of treasures on the outward journey in favoured holes and corners, and repossessing ourselves of them on our homeward way. The thing grew in scope till the whole mile-long route was stuffed with hidden treasure visible only to our inward eye. At last we would start out with bulging pockets and arrive at our journey's end depleted. Profound cunning was called for, as it was only when the coast was clear for a moment that a deposit could be made or safely withdrawn ; and during the hours at school one would sit tingling with excitement at the thought of all one's property thus cast adrift in jeopardy. There was a double chance of loss, for not only

might our deposits be found and abstracted, but so great and complex did the field of action become that one might well forget to retrieve some item in the list. Eagerly we vied with each other in pouring out with a lavish hand the noblest of our possessions. The thing reached a point when one had no longer any pleasure in a favourite knife or purse or pocket-book which had not passed through the ordeal and braved for three mortal hours the curiosity of the passer-by. And I shall never forget the proud moment of reckless heroism which was mine when I plunged my beloved watch into the dead leaves in the heart of the hollow tree. But I had to pay for it with a long and terrible morning of anxiety at school. When the game had lost its zest and grown stale and foolish in our estimation, I was condemned to many days of search for a paint-box that was dear to me, whose special cranny I had forgotten. And it is probable that—if the wall be standing still—my paint-box is somewhere secreted in it yet.



## VII

### *A DINNER PARTY*

Now that one has become a mere participant in the well-ordered feast, both the dinner itself and the occasion which it represents have lost much of their original flavour. The former should, of course, to be fully enjoyed, be stolen in small quantities from the pantry, and consumed in a dark, remote spare bedroom; the latter should be viewed surreptitiously from an ambush.

I can remember hardly any event which threw the nursery into so high a state of excitement as an impending Dinner Party. For this strange function, whose real intention was wrapped in obscurity, laid a potent spell upon the house, giving a wholly new aspect to familiar things, subtly affecting the behaviour of familiar persons. From the very moment when the iron handle was brought forth from the back of the sideboard, and at its



magic touch the dining-room table split across the centre and expanded irresistibly along the carpet (with a yawning chasm growing by inches in its interior) and was thereafter fitted with "leaves" to make good the discrepancy—till the moment when one had been finally captured for bed, and had nothing left to hope for, except to try to keep awake to listen for departing carriages, the afternoon and evening resolved themselves into one long adventure.

The development of the dining-room table from the humble board at which we had lunched into a glittering prodigy that filled the whole room was in itself a thrilling process, rich in climax. Its final equipment was so lavish, so far beyond the needs of the case, so fantastic and unreal that one could but marvel at it as one of the most astonishing revelations of the mind of the Grown-up. The number of knives and forks alone, if one took the trouble to count them, was cause for laughter, but the glasses were simply bewildering, suggesting as they did a degree of excessive and discriminating thirst which one had never dreamed of. The only innovation with which one could generously sympathize was the

treatment of the table napkins. In these up-standing and contorted forms—each bearing a small roll of bread within its snow-white heart—one could almost trace the hand of genius. That was a feat to be practised with clean pocket-handkerchiefs for days to come.

Of course it was well understood, as it had been vigorously laid down, that our sole duty on such an occasion as this was to keep out of the way. But to obey the injunction literally was more than flesh and blood could be expected to stand. It was really very little use trying to get into the kitchen—an alluring scene of distracted effort, where all manner of miracles were being performed—but one could always climb down the dank little enclosure outside and enjoy the prospect from the windows, slowly mastering by observation the principal items of the bill of fare. As a matter of fact, one was pretty well posted as to the progress of the campaign, and if there had been any question of the fish arriving late, or any doubt at all as to the successful outcome of the savoury, the company at nursery tea had discussed the crisis with sympathetic interest. Nursery tea was apt to be inadequate on these occasions, but we made no complaint on that

score. Well we knew—who better?—the strain that had been thrown on the administration.

The next glorious event of the evening was the appearance of Old John Gardener. That was one of the finest examples of the faculty of the party for turning all things topsy-turvy. For John—it was obvious to the meanest intelligence—looked hopelessly out of place in the house, though we were all agreed that he was exceedingly handsome in his black suit. For a long time we believed that he was regularly called in when the climax arrived as a sort of dictator to take over the complete direction of the affair—a position quite admirably in accordance with his talents ; and it was with something of disappointment that we discovered later that his was the humbler office of assisting with the carving and carrying the heavy dishes up the kitchen stairs.

Before we come to the active period of skirmishing which filled the evening, I would point out that much depended on the waitress of the moment. There were several of these in our day, but they all fell into one of two classes ; those who said they would bring you something after-

wards if you would go away now and be good, and those who gave you something at once as the price of your going away.

The Arrival was witnessed, of course, from a safe ambush. The favourite spot was the curtain at the head of the stairs which commanded the hall, but it only accommodated two. Others must be content with the top of the long linen-press in the lobby or the chink of a half-closed door. When each new-comer was safely stowed in the drawing-room we could come out and compare notes, ready to seek cover again at the next ring of the bell. But we were always in our places when dinner was announced, lying flat upon the upper landing and peering through the banisters, enjoying a magnificent view of the short procession as it turned into the dining-room.

After that there was a pause for a while. My sister probably detached herself from the main party, and stole into the bedroom behind us with a view to examining from a safe distance, and not without a certain awe, the cloaks of the visiting ladies laid out upon the bed. It seemed silly, but girls were like that. In the meantime there was not much to be done, for no one is interested in



soup, and the occasion was, therefore, a good one to go down to the dining-room door and "listen to the buzz." There we would stand whispering for a time while feverish servitors passed to and fro. And certainly there was nothing more mysterious or memorable in the whole evening's entertainment than this strange penetrating buzz of conversation which rose almost to a scream whenever the door was opened. That they were all talking at once at the top of their voices was, of course, obvious, though one could never distinguish the words. But what were they talking about? And why in the world did they do it? This was no ordinary conversation. It was clamour. And yet one must suppose they were eating all the time.

After that one would always pay a visit to the deserted drawing-room where the fire burned brightly and the lights were low. It gave one some sort of curious satisfaction to occupy the very stage of this fantastic drama, between scenes, and to discuss the gay host that would so soon return to it. But we must be up and doing, for a scout has reported that the joint has already descended to the kitchen, and the moment for active pillage has arrived. From our base upon

the upper landing a series of raids would then be made, and woe to the dish which, having served its purpose in the dining-room, was left unguarded in an empty pantry ! One after another we tried our luck with varying success, making merry picnic with the spoils. As time went on, the sport became more and more exciting, for we had two forces to contend with. On the one hand Old John Gardener, now relieved from his more pressing duties, would take it upon himself to guard the stairs, and an attack could only be made at a moment when he had been called away.

On the other hand, we were already being captured ourselves, everyone in his turn, for bed, and the company diminished fast as one reluctant victim after another was borne off to the night nursery. There was still, of course, the possibility of a daring descent in one's night-shirt, but by that time there was an added risk. For at any moment the ladies might emerge into the hall.

Even when one had settled down for the night there was always a remote chance that an ally in the kitchen would send up some final fragment of dessert. But it was not likely. One must



resign oneself to listening to the faint strains of music from below, and pondering upon the central problem which never grew stale—of why they did this sort of thing, and if they really had enjoyed themselves.

## VIII

### *DISCOVERY*

MANY of the most vivid and memorable of our adventures were the outcome of the burning need to Explore. Which of us has not been deeply thrilled by the compelling invitation of a closed door in a high wall about which the cobwebs hang and whose hinges are rusted with long disuse? Which of us has been able to contemplate unmoved the discovery of an unknown grating in the garden or an unknown trapdoor in the roof?

I had had an astounding glimpse into the possibilities of a strange hinterland on a memorable afternoon when I had come upon a plumber at work in the store-room, of all places. He had opened a little wooden door in the wall—most strange that we had never noticed it!—and by the yellow light of his candle, there thrust in, had shown up a dusty cavern, reaching away into the shadows beyond, where there were pipes and

rafters and a dank, alluring smell. It was no little disappointment that he should have locked the door when he had finished. But perhaps there were other such doors. Yes—it was almost too good to be true—but a long, wet half-holiday spent in patient search of every possible place of concealment revealed no less than three. There was one high up in the wall of the servants' bedroom, a second behind the wardrobe in the spare room, and a third—a trapdoor, no less—in the roof of the landing. And, when I came to think of it, there was a whole basketful of keys in the pantry cupboard. One of them was bound to fit. Clearly the time had come to gloat upon the prospects of the enterprise and lay plans with studied deliberation. I could hardly fail to wear a look of superior intelligence in my dealings with “the others.” They who still regarded a house as a thing of rooms and passages, and nothing more. Little they knew!

For, unlike all other nursery enterprises, which depended much upon companionship and concerted action, the enterprise of discovery must be pursued alone, else would it lose its flavour. One would have had no real or lasting joy in it had one not been “the first that ever burst”

into an unknown lumber-room or disused coal-hole. The Grown-up Persons *may* have known. It was their house ; strange if they were not fully acquainted with its contents. And yet, on reflection, one concluded that they had probably got no further than suspecting that such things were. It remained for me to make every hole and corner of the building my own by painstaking investigation. And then—if one came to think of it—what hiding-places ! You could lie *perdu* while the house resounded to the tramp of Callers ! You could hear your name shouted in every room with absolute security. Decidedly much had been added to the glorious possibilities of life by my interview with the plumber in the store-room. *He* knew, but I was not surprised at that. I had always considered plumbers to be men of extraordinary intelligence.

As soon as I had wriggled my adventurous way through the little door in the servants' bedroom and groped on with beating heart till I found I could stand upright, as soon as my shaking hands had set my candle-end alight, I knew that here was all that I had hoped for, and more. I sat down to try to realize the great experience. Beneath my feet were rafters, running cross-

wise, with grey bulged lines of plaster between them, which rather puzzled me. They had such an untidy, unfinished appearance. And there were props here and there in the roof, which sloped up above me; and everywhere were cobwebs, dust, and a sour, choking smell. I dare say the smell was the best of it. Had the place been clean and airy how much it would have lost! So I set out across the rafters and came to a great cistern, which fizzed and sputtered internally, and beyond that I saw a faint suggestive light rising from the floor of the cavern. So low was the roof at that part that I must creep upon my hands and knees. Still I went forward, not without delicious thrills of terror, for my line of retreat seemed far away by now, until I reached a little opening covered with perforated zinc. Lying on my face I peered down. With what a sudden shock of throbbing delight did I see before me, as in a picture, the old familiar nursery! There, all unsuspecting, was Lizzie, the under-nurse, laying the table for tea. There, with no idea of the tremendous events that were going forward above him, was my younger brother playing with his soldiers. I could even see upon the sofa the book that I had flung down but



half an hour ago—in the old days before I had become an explorer. I could feel the hot air from the gas rushing up through the opening. I could hear the clink of china. It was very strange that that should be possible, that I should even be able to make out the details of the room—with the naked eye. I whistled softly. Archie looked up, gazed round the room with a puzzled expression, and I chuckled with delight. Here, again, were possibilities, not to be immediately expended. How I would haunt and baffle them all in the days to come! I pictured to myself an occasion at nursery tea when a deep voice from the sky would startle and arrest the company. But Lizzie kept blowing dust off the table-cloth and looking up to see where it came from. It was time to beat a retreat.

The door behind the wardrobe proved very disappointing, revealing only a single pipe in a small wooden case, and it was many weeks before I managed to make my way through the trap-door in the landing. That was the greatest afternoon of all, as it was also the last. I roamed at will in strange low tunnels, untrodden for half a century by the foot of man. I found a grimy skylight, and when I had rubbed away the cob-



webs from it could see outside the tossing leaves of trees. I found myself, in the course of my journey, over the dining-room, over the bath-room, and over the hall. I climbed down perilously from one level to another. I saw a rat, and fled in abject fear, slipping between the rafters on to laths that seemed to give for a moment beneath my weight ; and at the last I lost myself completely and sat shivering with my candle, a forgotten outcast, wondering if by now the rest of them were safe in bed. Then I saw before me a narrow opening I had not explored, and started out again with fresh hope. It led me to the most astounding solution of my difficulty, for I came out triumphant, not by the trapdoor, but by the old familiar entrance from the servants' bedroom. And by the clock which I consulted there—it was not yet time for tea !

But there was something astir in the hall below, where the whole household was collected. And, indeed, a startling phenomenon had come to pass. The floor was covered with dust and plaster. The china on the cabinet lay in fragments among the *débris*, and overhead could be seen in the high ceiling a great open scar, not

unlike the map of Australia, where clean, 'white laths were visible. There was no more exploring after that, but it was sheer bad luck, as I knew well, that had brought me to this pass. For it never need have happened had it not been for the rat.

## IX

### *THE PHASES OF OLINDA*

IN the beginning of things Olinda—which was the house next door—had been, as it were, a sister house to our own. That was one leading reason why we regarded her many turns of fortune with sympathetic interest. We had, I think, a vague, unexplained feeling that had things been other than they were we might have been living in Olinda. We were so near to that, though we had just missed it. But with the years the close similarity between the two houses passed away. After a while we could no longer regard our neighbour as an equal but rather as a humble reminder of the state from which we ourselves had risen. For Olinda was left behind. It is true that she was the first to make a move. It was just about that dim, borderland period when one “began to remember” that Olinda invested in a new conservatory on the far side

of the front door (the building of which I must always look back to as the first outstanding event of my life, that I can recall as an eye-witness). This led to a still more striking innovation in the re-shaping of the whole contour of the drive.

We were not long in retaliating, however, with powerful effect, in the form of no less than three structural alterations in the next few years. First came the addition to the drawing-room, which actually had the effect of pushing the front door round the corner : then followed the new nursery wing, which completely shifted the centre of gravity of the house, as it were : and finally the new spare room, culminating in the Tower, from which we could look down over the intervening trees upon our dwarfed competitor.

But events out of doors, which followed at a later stage, were still more startling and dramatic. For there we not only outgrew Olinda, but prospered at her expense. Circumstances so fell out that we began to annex our neighbour's garden. After the early, prosperous days of the Girls' School, as she was slowly sagging downward

in the social scale to the point when her drive was untended and her conservatory was bare, bit by bit her crumbling territory fell into our hands. First the boundary was thrust back so as to absorb the walk and the two walnut trees. Then one summer our lawn enjoyed a prodigious expansion, devouring the space almost up to her very windows. And then (and this was the most astounding move of all) our kitchen garden leapt over, so to speak, to the farther side of her diminished lawn, a connecting walk was made at the foot; and thus Olinda was completely invested, encircled, and became, rightly regarded, no more than a bite, walled off and reserved out of our own domain.

In its earliest stage, Olinda's chief use in our eyes was as a happy hunting ground for exploring parties. It was simply a question of getting as far as you could without being seen. There were admirable shrubberies on both sides—there was a clump of bushes almost opposite the drawing-room windows—there was a high wall to surmount at the very outset, and as the gardener was a man of short and choleric temper (but no great runner) it might be said that all the necessary



conditions were forthcoming. By a succession of stealthy and cautious expeditions we had soon covered the greater part of the garden and laid bare its secrets. Once under shield of darkness a scout had even reached the stable yard, and reported a trough of a pattern hitherto unknown to us and a pig-sty—and that was a thing no one would have suspected. On another occasion our advance guard was taken red-handed at the end of the kitchen garden by the lady of the house, who, to his intense annoyance, received him with perfect kindness and good-will and offered him gooseberries. Had she been thoroughly angry some credit might have been got out of the encounter, but as it was the taste for exploring suffered a set-back.

Then came a sudden change and the great day of the Sale, when we could roam about the grounds at will (though we were not allowed to go inside the house among the throng that followed the auctioneer) and set our minds at rest about the pig-sty and the trough.

And after that—The Girls' School. It cannot be said that that period, which covered several years, was productive of much interest or curiosity on our part. It was in accord with our outlook



at that stage to regard a girls' school as a very monument of futility. We should have said, if questioned on the point, with bitter scorn that we should have to be pretty hard up before we began to take an interest in girls' schools. Clearly it was the manlier course to ignore it altogether, but there was no more effective method of reproving one's younger sister than to threaten her with Olinda when she grew up. And yet there were some few occasions when we broke through this fine indifference. When pea shooters happened to be particularly in vogue, or perhaps at the snow-balling season, certain passages did occur between us. And when they were playing tennis, it was almost impossible to ignore our neighbours. It became the custom for us to look on from the seclusion of the ivy at the top of the wall and tell each other that it really was too funny. And once an adventurous pupil actually "had the cheek" to scale the wall from the far side and make her way into our summer-house! That was an amazing discovery and we were completely at a loss what to make of it. We held no dealings with her at all and after an earnest and prolonged council of war it was decided that it would be best to hush the thing up and say nothing about

it to anyone. We were very thankful that it never happened again, for to tell the truth it was just the sort of thing that one didn't quite know how to take.

I have never known what was the outcome of that school—whether it had prospered so greatly as to move on to higher spheres, or declined to an ultimate collapse. But as far as we were concerned it came to an end. And Olinda stood empty.

As the months ran on what was left of the garden—for it had been heavily shorn by this time—became for us a strange and eerie retreat, where we could find that absolute seclusion which was always dear to us. It was surrounded now by a close wooden fence, so that no peering eye could penetrate within. The weeds came out like a rash upon the drive and garden walks, the grass grew high and coarse on the borders, the ivy wandered far. A sparrow nested in the porch, and a company of mole-hills occupied what remained of the lawn. One would spring nimbly over the fence and stand enthralled, drinking in that perfect desolation. Then came the day when, greatly daring, we prised open the kitchen window

and plunged into the dank recesses of the house itself.

Timorously we penetrated one by one the shuttered rooms, sweeping black dust off the mantelpieces and tearing down great strips of flapping wallpaper: turning on taps that would not run and (splendid moment!) ringing bells that resounded startlingly through the waste of emptiness. We learned much that day of the infinite variety that exists in the ordering of human affairs; of the unsuspected possibilities that lurk in the most straightforward concerns. For we were staggered by the discovery that what should have been the "old night nursery" was in fact the drawing-room: that positively a billiard-table had occupied what should have been the laundry. That opened our eyes. And, furthermore, there was no sign at all of a linen-press where it should have stood upon the upper landing.

I do not care to dwell on the last phase, when Olinda became a working-man's club, tottering to bankruptcy.

When last I saw Olinda the roof was gone and already a part of the upper story had been pulled down. But I had little room in my heart for

sentimental regrets. For a far greater tragedy was in train next door, where her proud neighbour (which concerned me much more closely) was being still more rapidly demolished.

X

*THE FIREWORK SEASON*

THE actual blaze of glory on the night of November Fifth, while it formed a memorable and wholly adequate climax to the campaign, did not by any means represent all the joys of the firework season. The fun began weeks before, on the very day when eager watchers could report the first appearance in shop windows of these splendid wares. Then was there held forthwith a solemn conclave, in which financial resources were carefully assessed. The amount in hand was always disappointing, but one gladly reckoned in, on a generous and extravagant computation, such sums from various quarters as might be expected to fall due before the day. It was largely a matter of chance—so small was one's regular income in the face of great emergencies like this. If a "likely uncle," for instance, put off his projected visit till later in the month, the whole scale of prospective investments had to be re-



luctantly revised. But when sufficient funds could not be earned by any of the recognised emergency methods—by walking instead of taking the tram, by learning poetry or by copying out the washing list—there was always a chance that a unanimous and influential petition might loose the purse-strings of those remote and unattainable Money-boxes which stood aloof, hoarding their dead capital, on the top shelf of the library cabinet. In one year of distressing penury that I remember a special subsidy of no less than two shillings a head was granted, but in set terms that implied no liability in years to come.

It must not be supposed that money was saved up until the approach of the great day; that would have been to lose half the delight of the firework season. At the first possible moment buying began. Indeed I have no doubt at all that it would have begun in July had opportunity offered. For the whole of those weeks one's wealth was being instantly converted into terms of fireworks—one was steadily accumulating stock. For that most glorious instrument the firework is but little understood by those who look only at its capabilities in the moment of explosion. There is much more to be got out of

it than that. It is not only to be let off ; it is to be handled, bartered and exchanged, lovingly contemplated. It is to be for several weeks the first thought in the morning and the last thought at night. The very feel of it is almost worth the money, and it becomes more dear as time goes on, by reason of continued self-denial. For every moment of its existence it presents a strong temptation to its owner, and by resisting it one comes to love it more. In truth there is almost an element of sadness in the moment of its realization. Even though it may fulfil one's highest hopes with a bang more loud or a flare more gorgeous than one had looked for, one cannot quite forget that it is its death struggle, its swan song. One cannot look upon its warm, blackened, empty remains without a poignant moment of regret. It had been so good a firework in its day !

I do not know who it was that invented the great system of trading in fireworks by exchange and barter. But every evening early in November the schoolroom after tea became an active mart, when everyone set out his box in its appointed place on the long table and worked to adjust the balance between the different items of his stock

by trading with his neighbour. It was very instructive, after several active sessions, to assess the value of what remained—in cash—and see how one had fared in these transactions. But when money was all exhausted and there was no longer a prospect of being flooded with new supplies all manner of fictitious values would be in vogue. One bold buyer perhaps has cornered the supply of Blue Devils, without which no assortment was complete. I have even known a penny Starlight, when that grade was in special demand, go for three halfpenny Golden Rains, with half a dozen Chinese Crackers thrown in.

I have a vivid recollection of the personality of each separate squib in all that multiform array. I was not a great admirer of Blue Devils, though one must, of course, show one's skill in throwing them at the right moment so that they burst in the air ; and it always seemed to me that Golden Rain (though much prized by some) was rather a weak-kneed and effeminate performer. But Starlight and Portfires were noble, and I always had a sort of lurking affection (not shared by my competitors) for that strange mongrel, the Flowerpot. Pin Wheels were of little use, unless one adopted the ingenious method of unwrapping them and

straightening them out. Riprap were often disappointing in action—but how splendid in their shape and form! Even Chinese Crackers were not to be despised, for there was a way of pinching them by which (if you were adroit) you could let them explode in your hand—to the admiration of younger brothers—and suffer nothing. As to Prince of Wales's Feathers, I can only say that in my opinion any denomination of this variety below the penny is unsatisfactory. If you don't keep shaking the powder down it stutters.

And so the great day came, and after a last excited session the market ceased its operations. Then followed the bonfire in the kitchen garden and Guy Fawkes. And then on the dark lawn before the house, where the step-ladder and the rocket-stake and the great flowerpot were already assembled, the proper rites began. One could look up with a depth of sympathy to the assembled faces at the upstairs window of those who had been deemed too young or too frail to take an active part. And for one hour one ran wild in fairyland, mid ravishing delights of eye and nose and ear. For I doubt if there be anything much better about a firework than the smell of it in action. There followed the dressing of wounds,

for probably none of us came off unscathed ; and in the morning that sad fascinating hour when one explored in detail every portion of the battlefield, seeking relics. Here was where the first rocket fell (for I heard the stick among the trees). Here was all that was left of my fourpenny Riprap, blown out and rent and blackened. And here among the bushes was the battered corpse of Jack-in-the-Box himself.



## XI

### *SECRETS*

SECRETS—that is to say, admitted secrets, which were whispered, treasured, and shared in holes and corners—were, of course, rather an affair for girls, and therefore held in fine contempt by the male section of the nursery. None the less, we were ourselves base enough, while maintaining this outward attitude, to borrow the idea in all its substance save the name. There were a few cases of rare harmony when a secret was shared by the whole company, though always with some unworthy suspicion that one's little sister would sooner or later give it away. To this order belonged the splendid experiences connected with tips from benevolent relatives. For while a grandmother or an aunt would seldom make any restrictions or conditions, an uncle was quite certain to accompany the contribution with a direct injunction to keep it dark. Not that that was necessary, as we should undoubtedly have

kept it dark in any case, for fear this sudden wealth should be impounded. But even had there been no possibility of interference much of the zest would have gone out of the traffic in tips had it not been conducted surreptitiously by both parties. One would have lost that intense excitement with which one came to regard the departing guest. As it was, there were even moments on the doorstep when it was obvious to our expert intelligence that he was looking round with some embarrassment for opportunity and we must come to his aid, perhaps by following him into the cab at the last moment with a forgotten razor strop—retained for the purpose—or by sending one of our number to see him off at the station.

The keeping of a secret entailed an exceedingly complex line of conduct. It must be accompanied by a series of hints (not overdone by any means—that was where the younger members came to grief), by vague allusions, by an expression of mysterious superiority, by daring challenges of open defiance, while those who were outside—what one might call the attacking party—passed through stages of sublime indifference (a very safe card, could one but have kept it up), of con-

ciliation and appeal, and of outraged hostility, threatening reprisals. The value of a secret did not consist at all in its intrinsic importance, for whatever that might have been it was certain, when finally exploded, to be contemptuously dismissed with the chilly query, "Is that all?" It consisted entirely in the handling of it, the skill with which it was kept in the foreground, the length of its course and, above all, in retaining it in as few hands as possible. For its power became slowly dissipated as one after another learned the truth. It was never considered sporting to leave a single member out in the cold, which seems to show that even in this heartless warfare there were some elements of mercy.

For it was warfare pure and simple. When you had been restrained from settling a dispute by assault and battery, and the desire to score off your adversary called for some other means, no handier or more effective weapon than the secret could have been desired. You could not at the moment punch his head, but you could always arouse his curiosity, work upon his inquisitiveness, and by taking in an ally (who would express the most profound interest in your communication) make him feel before the day was out that until

he knew where it was that you had been that afternoon (when you came in so cautiously by the stable door) life was not worth living. Simply anything would do provided it was properly handled. If a familiar picture had disappeared from the nursery wall, and he was given to understand that you could explain its removal if you would ; if he had overheard you shouting down to someone below from the bathroom window and you had closed it and turned away when he came in ; if you took to carrying with you wherever you went a small brown-paper parcel of alluring shape, refusing to vouchsafe a reason—it was enough ; you had your revenge. Of course, you must take certain risks in pursuit of this high end. If he found out, you knew yourself to be routed, disgraced, reduced to a laughing-stock, while he would triumph gloatingly.

However, there were reprisals. The recognized retort when a secret was in active operation against one was to start a secret of one's own. This was uphill work. For it was always tacitly assumed that a secret was accidental in its origin, and here the mechanism was a little too obvious. And thus the counter-secret, if I may so call it, was certain to be met at the outset with scorn, as

having been invented by you "because you couldn't find out about mine"—which, of course, it was. Still, if it was a good secret in itself it would begin to bite after a time. Even if I had no burning desire to solve it (which I probably had) I could not but admit that it had begun to sap the strength of my own effort. And so the situation would frequently ripen into an armistice and an exchange. And then it only remained for each competitor to greet with withering scorn the revelation of the other, and to declare that if he had known that yours was as rotten as that he would never have divulged his own. And there the incident would close.

The other method by which secrets would come to an end—for they were never of long duration—was by the process of gradual dilution. There was no secret as strong as that which was held by one alone, provided that it was skilfully worked. The greatest success of my life in this regard was an occasion when I defied the attack of a united host on the question as to why it was that Uncle John had called me downstairs in the middle of nursery tea—me alone—to speak to him in the library. I saw at a glance the exceptional value of this incident as a secret,



and I held to it grimly for two whole days, during which I wielded real power. But they were lonely days. On the third afternoon I could stand it no longer, and I took a partner into the concern. It was worth a good deal even after that, but when—to gain a definite ulterior end—I had taken in a third the game was already up.

Then it had become common property (to the intense disappointment of the whole assembly) that Uncle John had not wished to ask me to stay with him in Ireland in the summer holidays (as had been feared), nor to suggest that he should subscribe to the fund for a new football (as had been hoped), nor yet to inform me of a proposed legacy (my sister's solution). He had only wanted to know if I happened to have picked up his pipe on the tennis lawn.

## XII

### *VARIATIONS ON A THEME*

THERE is a story told of one of our company in the nursery that on an occasion when he was at a tea-party he took aside a chosen ally into a safe corner remote from the festivities to impart to him a sacred confidence. With every appearance of mystery and a full regard to the weight of his disclosure he bound his companion to secrecy, and the great intelligence broke from him in a dramatic whisper. "I'm an author!" he said. And I have every reason to believe that the other was very much impressed.

But the author in question was not by any means the only one. That was a summer of extraordinary literary activity. The telling of stories in one form or another had, of course, flourished from the very beginning of things. There was a time when Archie, who had a wonderful faculty for fluent and meaningless romance, and an amazing ability for reproducing startling

words and phrases, used to regale my sister, behind the curtains, with his perennial serial, "The Adventures of a Lion." My sister was enormously impressed by this narrative, as, indeed, were we all in some degree, though we would never have confessed it. She filled in the frequent pauses with interjected murmurs of gurgling admiration, and the effect partook of the nature of a duet. Whenever we stopped to listen we would hear something like the following :—

"And so the Lion swallowed him up, every bit . . ."

"Oo !"

"But he had a pair of scissors in his pocket . . ."

"Ooo !"

"And he cut a hole and got out . . ."

"Ooooo !"

"And then there came an Albatross . . ."

"Ooo ! Oooo !"

But it was not until the advent of the school story that we became absorbed in the splendid possibilities of fiction. It was then that the second great serial started on its long career. This time I was myself the victim, the recipient ; and the teller was Colin, my next older brother.

It was a profound secret between us two, and for many months nearly all the spare time that we spent together was devoted to it. I cannot remember that it had any name, but it dealt almost exclusively with the adventures of one Eastham, a schoolboy. I fear that most of the details of this romance are now lost to me, but I seem to remember that while the hero passed through a long series of exciting situations these were remarkably narrow in their scope, being confined indeed to two classes only—cricket matches, of which there was at least one in every instalment, and dark dealings with bookmakers “in the town.” So deeply engrossed did I become and so urgent were my demands for more that the teller of the tale began to put on airs. Eastham was no longer dealt out with lavish hand and on every suitable opportunity ; he became by degrees an occasional favour, then a special, rare concession. And his author found that he had established—that which we were always on the look-out for in all our dealings—a hold over me. He would threaten to tell me no more unless I became his willing slave, and I abjectly consented, for I could not live at all without my Eastham. The thing became a flagrant

tyranny, for when Colin found he could not convey his demands to me in the presence of other people he laid down a certain signal between us that should mean "If you don't do it at once there will be no more of Eastham." He had but to raise the first and third fingers of his hand, while holding down the middle one, and I knew my fate, and carried out his behest forthwith. Well do I remember those two dread fingers with their crushing message. I knew myself to be helpless before them, until at last there came a day when I rebelled. He had left his cap in the stable and I must go and fetch it. I refused. Up went the two fingers. It came home to me that I was paying too great a price even for Eastham, and I would not go. And then I made the surprising discovery which showed me that had I had more spirit I need never have borne the yoke. For Eastham still went on—that very evening he made 93 not out against All England. Then I saw that Eastham was quite as necessary to Colin as he was to me. The tables were turned. It was I who could now afford to be an indifferent listener—to all appearance. At the last I could dictate the occasions when I would consent to listen. It might even have



reached a point where it was I who could signal (with upheld fingers) my commands. But Eastham underwent a sudden change.

The telling of tales as an occupation was superseded by a new and more splendid achievement—that of writing them. It was my sister who quite unwittingly set the new fashion. She announced her intention of copying out the whole of *The Mill on the Floss*, and could already show the first few sentences laboriously transcribed in enormous, staggering print. Well do I remember her joy when some facetious Grown-up offered her five shillings for each completed chapter. But although she never reached the bottom of the page she had suggested a far more glorious undertaking—original composition. Within a week there was not one of us but had his small black book in active operation. They were, of course, all school stories, and they all dealt in Eastham, or at least he figured in all of them. His original author really could not make up his mind whether to regard this universal plagiarism in the light of flattery or to be indignant that the rest of us had “bagged” his hero. In most cases the stories were written but mine was printed, for the obvious reason that

it was much more like a real book. I got on more slowly than the others on that account, and I sometimes doubt if, after all, it was much more like a real book. But it was a great time.

Those in Authority look back upon that period of feverish activity (for we did not like to fall short of an output of a chapter a day) as on a sunny oasis in the endless struggle of our upbringing. We were all so "good," so consistently "out of mischief," though a price must be paid for this immunity in the increased vigour of the contest that took place at the time when we must go to bed. The real difficulty was, where all, with the exception of my sister, were so actively creating, to command an audience for one's work. But the rule was generally accepted that if you would listen to my chapter I would listen to yours. I cannot but believe that the work would have gained something in originality had it been possible to get on without this interchange of ideas. For as it was, the same incidents, in a more or less garbled form but without any attempt to veil their identity, occurred with perfect regularity in all four works. When Eastham tripped up the policeman, as recorded by myself, the three other writers' chapters of the following day would

find their inspiration in that episode, and when—as recorded by my eldest brother—he caught his friend Leach stealing money from the coats at the cricket field the rest of us could hardly wait till the chapter was concluded before seizing book and pencil to catch that fine impression ere it fled.

The volumes are no longer in existence. No doubt as soon as some new interest had taken their place they were treated with a contempt which I cannot quite believe that they deserved. And I have but the vaguest memories of the results of all that keen endeavour. But at least I can recall the opening words of my first chapter, which would seem to show that, despite one's deep pre-occupation with the game of cricket, one had not quite grasped all the complexity of its technique :

“Eastham was a very good bat. He could make 79 runs. Leach could only make 23 runs. Thomson could make 38, and Milton about 16.”

### XIII

## *MAKING MONEY*

THE financial resources of the Nursery were sharply divided into two classes. We all possessed two sorts of money—that which was readily negotiable and that which was sternly withheld. We suffered from a disability (which is apt to pursue one even in later life) in having our funds “tied up,” so that we could by no means lay our hands on them. This was chiefly brought about by the hated institution of Money-boxes. There they were in a row on the top shelf of the library, handsomely fashioned in artistic forms, after the style of castles, ships, or cricket-balls—mine was like a small portmanteau, clasped at the corners with brass. But one feature they all had in common—a slot in the lid shaped with such unholy ingenuity that no amount of patient shaking upside down could possibly recover the deposit. I do not say that they were never unlocked. On the approach of a birthday or at

Christmas time and on certain outstanding occasions it was possible to draw upon them. But that meant an appeal to Those in Authority, the stating of a case, all manner of formality before the key would be brought forth. You could not dip into them at will at any moment when you wanted to buy things. No matter what hoarded riches they might contain—and they had been known to run up to two or three pounds!—they gave one no sense whatever of possession, and one would gladly at any time have sold the whole, had it been permissible, for a free half-crown.

The sources of supply, by which these exasperating institutions were fed, were various. It had been intended in the beginning that they should be supported by contributions under two headings, the compulsory and the voluntary. If we ever *wished* to put in any money in addition to that which was prescribed, we should be heartily encouraged to do so. But the voluntary clauses of the act broke down completely, and the compulsory clauses were only enforced under the most violent protest. Windfalls of all sorts were apt to be impounded whenever they reached too high a figure. It was no use at all to get a birthday present of half a sovereign, for that was sure



to go. And the whole traffic in tips from benevolent uncles was given an added zest and interest from the fact that the shadow of the Money-box hung over it and it must be handled with the utmost care and secrecy.

But when we thought or spoke of money we never meant what was referred to with a fine contempt as "Money-box money." It was the real thing that we meant, which came and went by methods under our direct control. As a matter of fact the interest in money, like other nursery interests, fluctuated wildly. For weeks one would be cheerfully bankrupt and entirely wrapped up in less mercenary affairs, forgetting even to observe when the first day of the month came round. At other times by every plot and plan, by every effort of concentrated ingenuity would one strive to attain a decent competence. This was nearly always brought about by some special call. It was no use going out of one's way to amass wealth without a definite object to which to devote it. But let us suppose one had seen a truly gorgeous steam-engine *that would go* in a shop, or a new sort of telescope that pulled out to five times its normal length instead of three; then a determined effort must be made. And there was that

advertisement of a real printing press in *The Boy's Own Paper*. And that complete Magic Lantern that could be worked with a night-light—and talking of lanterns what about Bull's-eye lanterns? Thus on occasion the possibilities of this glorious world would present themselves, tumbling over one another in a sort of mental cataract, and in a moment one was awake to the instant need of money—heaps of money.

The official pocket-money was only regarded as a sort of minimum wage. It was no use saving it. That system had been given a fair trial on more than one occasion and abandoned in disgust. It called for an enormous amount of self-denial with a miserably inadequate return. No one would dream of depending upon pocket-money for any of the larger ends of life. But there were tips which sometimes came opportunely and there were a dozen other sources of supply. The most obvious of these was to walk and save the penny for your tram fare; and if Old John Gardener was in charge of you, you could make him walk and save his penny too. And there were a good many promiscuous odd jobs by which one's income could be increased in one's spare time, in the words of the popular

advertisements. Twopence was the usual tariff for copying the washing list, and sometimes there were envelopes to address or newspaper wrappers, which paid pretty well. But that was close and wearing work and one ran the risk of having the whole batch rejected on some miserable plea of spelling or handwriting.

Far more profitable was the learning of poetry which was really paid for, as far as I can remember, at a fairly liberal rate. Anyway I got half a crown for the *Pied Piper*. I know very well that I am quite incapable of such a feat now (even for twice the money) but I remember almost every word of it to this day. A good many uncles and aunts were involved in this poetry business, and it would have been lucrative had one been able to develop the practice of disposing of the same wares in more than one market. But when I was discovered selling Tennyson's *Revenge* for the third time in one week this method of expansion was put a stop to. Still some tidy sums were accumulated in this way, and at last the steam-engine was made possible.

As I look back upon all that period of stern endeavour and dogged labour towards a given end, one occasion stands out luridly—one bright

occasion when I "got rich quick." It was all very wrong, of course. He was a boy who came with some callers and I know now that he must have been both astoundingly wicked and amazingly rich. For he took me away to the shrubbery behind the stable and tossed me for sixpences. It so happened that the summons came for his return—the carriage was waiting—when, after a fine run of luck I was four and sixpence up, so I came very well out of that adventure. But he didn't care. It was all the same to him! He was indeed a tremendous fellow.

And then there was the great Dandelion Campaign. It was I myself who thought of that. I had so often heard complaints of the state of the lawn, and I volunteered to uproot the dandelions, at, I think, threepence a hundred. Within a few days every juvenile member of the household, each armed with an out-worn table-knife, was at work upon his hands and knees, crawling hither and thither, prodding and levering up the spoil. And in the evenings the harvest was counted and paid for, and knives were sharpened against the morrow. Had we but been content with the conditions a steady income for the summer might have been assured. For after the stock ran out

were there not plantains and daisies? But we became too skilful. Sidney contrived to invent a new tool, with a long handle and two sharp prongs, which traversed the lawn with devastating effect, and when after a busy undisturbed half-holiday we marched in, in force, soil-stained and weary, our weapons over our shoulders and our booty in a sack, and demanded Twelve Shillings and Sevenpence at a single scoop it was at once declared that the thing had got completely out of hand.



## XIV

### THE HOTEL

WHEN I observe the *blasé* children of globe-trotting parents, complacently sauntering in to *table d'hôte*, giving orders unabashed to waiters, lolling nonchalantly in the lounge, entering large, silent public rooms without a tremor, sometimes a wave of pity passes over me that they should so soon have come to this—and never know their loss. They are simply suffering prematurely from the wretched disillusionment of the Grown-up. They have bartered in exchange for a swaggering indifference one of the most splendid experiences of childhood. They have lost all appreciation of the supreme adventure of staying in an Hotel.

Adventure was the first aim and end of those golden years. To let no one day be like another, to pack one's life as full as possible of thrilling experience, to break out in a new place whenever possible, was the sum of one's persistent and

conscientious endeavour. And adventure might be arrived at in a great variety of ways—by open rebellion, by exploring all manner of hidden mysteries, by joyously accepting and making the most of all sorts of abnormal conditions and unexpected situations that might befall. But it might also be attained without any collision whatever with the forces of law and order. For there were times when Those in Authority, entering fully into the spirit of the thing, would “take us away,” for what they called a “treat,”—a word which we strongly resented. Sometimes even the suggestion would come from one of ourselves. Was not I myself the true author of that tremendous expedition when we invaded the Isle of Man in a body? But it would never have occurred to any one of us to suggest the mighty and epoch-making event that I have now to describe. That was something altogether too dazzling and remote; and when the tremendous truth, which had already been dimly suggested by sundry hints and veiled innuendoes—after the accepted style of Grown-ups—burst in a moment upon us we were positively staggered. It was Archie who broke into the nursery one evening, panting and flushed. “I’ve found it out!”

he shouted. "We're going to stay in a Hotel!"

After the first pandemonium of excitement had subsided, we settled down to discuss and solve to the best of our ability, a question that can hardly be said to have been impertinent. What, exactly, *was* an Hotel? We had seen the outside of them: we had speculated idly upon their interiors: and we knew very well that they were much frequented by certain Grown-ups, who had no fixed place of abode. But we knew no more of what to expect when one had passed beyond their portals than if they had been an enchanted garden. And then the details of the scheme came out. We were to drive, it seemed, all of us, in the big wagonette, with Tom Coachman and the horses. The distance was not less than twenty miles. We were to come back the following day; and if it turned out to be a wet afternoon the expedition would have to be put off. As if that mattered! That was just the way with Grown-ups. They had no sense of proportion. They never understood what were the vital elements in an adventure. Had the distance been a hundred miles through heavy sleet, what could it matter with the prospect of an Hotel at the end?

As it turned out rain began to fall before we had got half-way. Then we were all thrown into an agony of suspense. The desirability of turning back was calmly debated while we squirmed in silent terror lest the cup be dashed from our lips. We were told, in the most matter-of-fact way, that if we had to give it up it was only a question of postponing it for a week. There was no grain of comfort in that. It was altogether beyond our power to peer into an uncertain future as far as next week. If we turned back all was over. Life was desolated. How *could* we, how could we *dream* of going back now—to the same old house and garden, to the same old nursery tea, to that intolerably humdrum life that is lived outside hotels? . . . And then Tom Coachman's hat blew off, and we must stop and I must get out and pick it up. That decided it. I have never clearly known why. And on looking back I cannot see how Tom's hat can possibly have affected the issue. And yet we all firmly believed that that incident was the turning point. Long after we would refer to it as a happy chance that had saved us in a critical moment. We elevated it into the outstanding episode of the day. Years after we would recall it to one

another in grateful memory. . . . " Lucky old Tom's hat blew off, wasn't it? "

Anyhow we went on, and the sun was shining brightly within the hour, which of course proved that we were right.

While I remember all about Tom's hat, his convulsive clutch at it as it flew, the exact spot on the left side of the road where I picked it out of a gorse bush, the side of the carriage from which I handed it up to him, I must now confess that I have but the haziest and most unsatisfactory recollection of what happened in the hotel. I suppose that it was all so splendid and overwhelming, that one was in such an exalted and intense state of mind that it passed as if it had been a dream. I know that we occupied two adjoining bedrooms, and that Those in Authority were some distance up the passage—which was an admirable arrangement. And I can vouch for the fact that we put our boots outside the door at night, and that one of us in the morning discovered the number of the room chalked upon the soles of them : and it may be added that for several weeks to come all the boots at home were similarly treated every morning by Archie, who had a love of effective detail. I know that we



locked our doors and carried away the keys when we went down to dinner. (Tremendous places, these hotels! You never knew what sort of blackguards might be about.) And when we came to compare notes at night I had counted six bathrooms and Archie had only found four. But then Archie had found the smoking-room, though he had not dared to go in. But I am quite at a loss as to what we did, how we spent the evening, or what occurred on the following morning. The scene at dinner alone remains clear-cut in my memory. Quaking we entered that astounding apartment where, as it seemed, some thousands of people were all eating together. Many of the handsomest and most effectively dressed of them were, it is true, handing round the food, and one magnificent fellow was carving at a side table. One could hardly take one's eyes off him. But that was not all. The magic of the hotel had invaded the meal itself. In the long, bewildering succession of dishes (which had a printed programme of their own) we were quite unable to distinguish our two old friends—the dual ingredients of every normal dinner—Meat and Pudding. And there was a waiter who bent down respectfully and asked you fascinating con-

undrums in some way relating to the food. The first of these—and for my part I gave it up—was “‘Thick’ or ‘Clear?’” And he called you “Sir” . . .

At last we were in bed, with no intention whatever of frittering away historic hours in sleep. And there was a cathedral clock that chimed the quarters. And about the hour of 1 a.m. we met with a rude shock in the shape of one, who was not content with knocking at the door—not that we would have heard him easily—but actually put his head into the room and told us bluntly that we must make less noise as half the guests in the passage had complained to him. Archie thought he was the Manager, but I was not at all sure. Still there can be no doubt that he was some pretty important person or he would never have spoken to us in that way. Had it been a waiter we were sure he would have said “Sir.” And after that there was really nothing for it but to go to sleep. But my habit of bolting my bedroom door in hotels when I retire for the night dates from that evening.

*SENT ON APPLICATION*

It was a great day when we discovered the real value of newspapers. Previous to that they had often been employed for the making of paper boats on Sunday afternoons, and they were at times worn as cocked hats. There was also a method—culled from the pages of *St. Nicholas*—by which, through a process of intricate foldings and pleatings, they could be converted into large ungainly boxes, which swayed perilously upon four bandy legs. But we were in no way concerned with their printed contents; we valued them solely by their quality as raw material. The *Times* was ever in great demand—incomparable stuff for battleships. The *Spectator* failed chiefly in point of size; while some of the evening papers, flimsy and easily torn, were classed as useless.

But the reading of papers was accepted merely

as one of the strange habits of Grown-up Persons, interesting only in so far as it lent itself to parody. (It went very well—in company with a pair of spectacles made out of lemonade wire—if carried out with pompous solemnity after the manner of Uncle Henry. The scene always culminated in a start of exasperation in which the paper was crushed into a ball and flung beneath the table with violent words about the Stock Exchange.) But at last there came a time when the daily press was eagerly scanned by the entire nursery with deliberate view to its contents, and we were able to discover in this unpromising source material for a whole campaign of a most productive and exciting nature.

With a view to encouraging the art of letter-writing, which did not flourish among us, we had been given permission to help ourselves to stamps for all legitimate correspondence, and Colin had had the wit to see in this concession wide possibilities which had not occurred to the rest of us. Thoughtfully he ascended, with a large bundle of newspapers, to the top of the nursery cupboard—a favourite haunt of his when he wished to meditate in remote seclusion. There he remained for the entire morning and his aspect

and behaviour for the rest of the day pointed clearly to some secret project which he was hugging silently. It was not till two days later that it burst upon us. He had risen, to my great surprise, fully ten minutes before it was absolutely necessary and rushed downstairs to the dining-room while I was still dressing. Then he dashed in upon the nursery breakfast, in the middle of the porridge stage, glowing with triumph. With a splendid gesture he flung upon the table a long, bulgy blue envelope, addressed (without a shadow of doubt) to himself. Indeed, his name was there adorned with the high title of "Esquire." What was inside? Of course he must needs resort to the barren and exasperating practice of "making us guess," while he supped his porridge complacently. But at last he broke the seal—yes, it was sealed!—and took out a number of printed papers, which he flung into the fire, and a small metal box containing the most delightful little caricature of a tablet of soap. The extraordinary cleanliness of the whole company that afternoon was the subject of much favourable comment, but sundry bright hopes that were built upon the incident were doomed to disappointment. Indeed, there was a violent



reaction within the week, upon an evening when we were each engaged in turn in testing the capabilities of a new blacking.

For with the fortuitous departure of Those in Authority to the Continent for a month the great new sport was soon in full swing. The alluring phrase, "Sample sent on application," became forthwith our watchword. We had discovered a fresh interest that carried us far beyond the narrow confines of the nursery, that suddenly put a new value upon newspapers, that made the arrival of the post the outstanding event of the day, and that brought us at once into touch with countless manufacturers throughout the land. By common consent our operations were conducted with profound secrecy. A special scout was told off every day to meet the postman at the door and bring up the morning's spoils, and our correspondence, which had become enormous, was for the most part conducted in the box-room behind locked doors.

After a time we specialized. One of us took up the study and comparison of soaps, tooth powders and hair restorers. Another admitted only to his growing collection blotting-paper, pencils, and pen-nibs. A third dealt exclusively

in patent medicines, with a special leaning to popular cures for fits. But the grocery department—my own—was that which scored most heavily. Indeed, I was only allowed to carry on this section of the concern, free from outside competition, on the understanding that the spoils must be ultimately divided. Even then I had far the best of it. There was nothing—not even the diminutive tubes of Special Cream for the Complexion—to be compared with my little sack of sugar, my three small biscuits in an envelope, or my baby canister of Finest Ceylon Tea. Over the latter we had an important meeting of committee to test its qualities, but so unsuccessful was the result that I have always doubted if the water could really have been boiling. Or possibly the best tea should not be made in a tumbler? Archie, the Stationer, struck out a special line in paints and blackings after a while, with which there is no doubt he had a very happy time, so much so that his province was unwarrantably invaded by the Chemist, who had begun to find patent medicines unprofitable—though it is true he had the satisfaction of trying some of them on the cat. My little sister (true to the call of

her sex) dealt, through an amanuensis, in "patterns" of stuffs and fabrics.

Of course we had many embarrassments. Some of our urgent inquiries elicited no reply. So many of them demanded the amount of return postage that depredations on the stamp-drawer in the library had to be carefully regulated in accordance with the supply at the moment, and as the stock ran low a call even had to be made upon pocket-money. But our chief anxieties were connected with the behaviour of sundry of our correspondents, who at times insisted upon reopening the incident after the sample had been sent and the transaction was (from our point of view) complete. We would get disturbing letters, pointing out that since the writer's last communication (enclosing sample of asthmatical cigarettes) he had heard no further from us. He would be glad to have our order at our earliest convenience. We were frankly baffled and not a little concerned as to what was our proper course in the face of this development. Discussion always ended by the letter being burned without reply, but we could not quite forget it. We could only hope that he would not go so far as to take proceedings. But there was one manufacturer

(of a new and improved blend of office gum) who created a fearful scare by announcing by post-card that his representative would shortly be in our neighbourhood and would call upon us one day at the end of the week. We spent the Friday and Saturday afternoons in ambush in the coal-hole, and only breathed freely again when Sunday morning arrived and we had heard nothing of this disturbing emissary. But the Stationer went so far as to insist upon returning, with acknowledgments, the half-finished bottle of gum.

It was indeed a grand, absorbing pursuit. During the weeks when it was at its height we lived as in the presence of a continual birthday, with packets of all shapes and forms arriving by every post, and despite the experiments we carried out with the spoils our private collections soon reached fine proportions. It was the Chemist who, quite unwittingly, gave the thing away. He had a special friend outside the camp, in the boy in the house opposite, who by way of developing a striking peculiarity had just become a strong teetotaller. He had already tried to convert Old Joe, the mole-catcher, to his principles, when it occurred to him that useful work might be done nearer home. He had been looking over the

Chemist's stock, and must have abstracted an item from it all unobserved. For he was discovered one evening surreptitiously, and no doubt with the best intentions in the world, putting a spoonful of The One Safe Cure for the Drink Habit into his father's tea. And that was the end of it.



## XVI

### *THE USES OF THE DUMMY*

I do not think that we could lay claim to any special originality in this question of Dummies. I suppose that most children, certainly most lonely children, have known what it was to have a familiar spirit—an imagined brother, sister or friend to keep them company. It is as much part of the game as the practice of inventing and elaborating long, thrilling romances—in which one sustained the rôle of hero—leading always to a triumphant outcome and the confusion of one's enemies ; or the practice of entering into conversation with inanimate objects or any of the other natural results of the tissue of fantasy in which one lived. Familiar spirits indeed require no explanation or defence : they were—as I hope to show—too obviously useful and necessary a part of one's equipment. One could hardly have been expected to get along without them.

They sprang, I think, from that mystery of

dual personality which so often lay in the background of one's thoughts. For at a time when almost everything was matter for wonder and surprise, in a world which was full of discoveries there was perhaps nothing more surprising than one's own behaviour. One was continually doing and saying things that it was hard to believe in afterwards. How often have I wakened in the morning in meditative mood and picked out some action of the day before, as an insoluble puzzle, not probably with any sense of remorse or satisfaction, but with sheer incredulity. One would seem to have had such a vague and incomplete idea of what one was capable of doing. The unaccountable actions were of all sorts, good or bad or merely outlandish: some of a lurid wickedness, others perhaps of a strangely sympathetic and admirable nature. I would reflect that I was bad enough in many ways, but it simply could not have been I who had torn up that telegram lying upon the hall table in order to score off Those in Authority. That was altogether beyond one's range: that was felony. On the other hand, I had, candidly, my good points; but my treatment of the kitchen-maid, my spontaneous offer to bring in the coals

for her (because she had had bad news from home)—that was quite outside my scope. I knew very well that I never, on principle, did that sort of thing. And so there grew the feeling that some one else had done it ; some one, so to speak, who had popped in and taken possession of me for the moment—my familiar spirit.

I remember well how the thing began. It was when I was trying to explain away an act of outstanding virtue, which had naturally offended my allies and had considerably bewildered me. Old John Gardener had forgotten to come in for the letters. Ever since that awful episode of the telegram I had had an exaggerated idea of the vast importance of all postal communications. It was now four minutes past eight, and the post went at 8.10. The distance was not less than half a mile. And I happened to be tremendously busy at the time with a cap pistol that needed repairs. Yet I seized the letters and sped at the very top of my pace, arriving with them just in the nick of time. I was duly rewarded for this noble action. But I had never thought of that. Why had I done it? Colin, who was a good deal annoyed—partly as this sort of “sucking up” to Those in Authority smacked

of disloyalty ; partly perhaps because he hadn't thought of doing it himself—wanted to know why. He supposed, in his surliest manner, that I expected to score somehow. I assured him nothing had been further from my thoughts. He pressed me. Why? And I was quite at a loss. "I don't know," I said at last, not without a natural irritation. "I don't believe I did do it. It must have been my Dummy." It is useless to inquire where I got the word from, but that was the origin of Dummies. Each one of us set one up forthwith.

Their first use was simply to explain away such incidents as I have just related. They proved invaluable. Their co-operation was indeed most comforting and satisfactory as time went on. It was not Archie who made the calf swallow a cabbage with a string tied to it and afterwards pulled it round the yard. It was his Dummy. It could not have been Colin who shut up the hens in the conservatory, but it might very easily have been his Dummy. One had, of course, to suffer the consequences of such acts, but it was some comfort that we knew, and we alone, who was responsible.

But after a while Dummies began to enjoy



new powers. If you had any unpleasant duty to perform, it became the custom to send your Dummy, as a representative. If I were captured, owing to culpable negligence on my part, to accompany Authority upon an afternoon call, you may be sure it was not I who went—though admittedly it appeared to be so. The ordeal had to be gone through to the bitter end, but it was not nearly so bad as it used to be in the old days. I had at least the happy consolation that this poor fellow was only my Dummy and that I was at home playing rounders. And in the same way the sort of relatives who insisted on kissing you—and that was a bad moment—little knew that they had really failed of their intention, and it was only your Dummy who had suffered this indignity.

We did not all treat our Dummies alike. My little sister, who occupied an obscure position in most of our undertakings, suddenly adopted a method which we could not but admire in this regard. Our reason for not ourselves imitating it was due to a feeling that it was peculiarly suited to her sex, though why that was so I am at a loss to explain. She had a whole committee of Dummies. And to these she would gravely



submit any new problem that occurred for decision. There was Mabel, who always took the cynical and pessimistic view. There was Alice, who was simply horrid. Cynthia was so good and kind but very stupid: and Selina had red hair and talked too much. The only part that these played in her life (for she never grasped the more elaborate operations of the Dummy) was that of discussion and debate, but she spent many hours in consultation with them. For the rest Archie had a habit of sending forth his Dummy upon all manner of quests and adventures. It was his office to go out into the world and do all the things that his master was restrained from doing, and there was one occasion when after a fearful collision with the police he was locked up for three weeks, and Archie had to do himself all the little jobs that by rights belonged to him, eagerly counting the days till his release. This always seemed to me rather an unjustifiable and fantastic development. The essence of my Dummy was that he was always at hand, ready to change places with me in a moment, as occasion demanded, though I would sometimes, when he had had some particularly unpleasant job to perform, allow him as a reward

to stay up for half an hour after I had gone to bed.

Dummies were thus of the greatest possible practical use, and they were also, in times of loneliness and distress, a real help and comfort. There was a day when two small boys were tossing in bed in the same room in the horrid throes of chicken-pox. All attempts to while away the time had failed, and the mocking sunshine poured in through the window, along with the voices of those more fortunate ones who had not yet fallen beneath the scourge. Of course it didn't do to cry, but still . . .

"Never mind," whispered Archie. "It's all right really. Our Dummies are out there, having a good time!"

## XVII

### *WHITE WEATHER*

It is a deplorable thing to lose one's taste for snow. There is no more certain sign of advancing age. It means that one has ranked oneself for ever on the side of the Grown-ups. It is equivalent to losing one's taste for chocolate cream in slabs and for walking on the top of narrow walls and for climbing trees, and for taking violent exercise immediately after lunch. It means, in fact, that one has reached the point of giving up nearly everything that is worth doing, that one is no longer capable of entering into the purest forms of high adventure. It is possible perhaps to avoid the whole misfortune of growing up, to save at least some shreds and tatters of one's early possessions, and surely such a splendid gift as snow should be among them. I cannot believe that we need fall so low as to look out of the window of the club shaking our heads, while the air

is full of scurrying flakes, and talk about what a beastly mess the streets will be in to-morrow. Have we no prick of memory, and do we see no vision and hear no voice from the past that brings back to mind what snow once meant to us?

It meant everything! It was by all odds the most glorious of the unforeseen events of the year. One would lie awake at night in the restless hope of it. One would spring out of bed at the dawn and draw up the blind, quivering with anticipation. One would welcome it with shouts of delight—it was quite impossible to sit still and pay any attention to one's lessons if it came on unexpectedly—with pagan rites and invocations, watching it with a painful, strained anxiety minute by minute, fearing a slackening of its force, dreading any lightening of the stone-grey pall above from which it tumbled, dull and dark, as one looked up against the sky, to change—oh, joyous miracle!—to twinkling white as it passed by. One would tear oneself away to hide one's head awhile in sofa cushions and wait and wonder: then to return and see if it was gaining ground. And when it began to “lie”! At first a film of grey upon the grass, deepening,

deepening. Then the drive would begin to whiten and the trees to carry a light tracery. And now the grass is white, with only single stalks and tufts emerging, the gravel of the drive has lost its pebbly surface—the flakes are banking deep at the foot of the window pane, the trees are loading heavily. And now the line between drive and lawn is submerged. All is a flat expanse of dazzling white. It is *lying*! It is really lying, and falling still, and getting heavier! It is all glorious, all too good to be true. Every circumstance of the dull drab life of yesterday is blotted out, forgotten, rendered remote, lost in the splendid miracle of to-day. Let us rush forth with a whoop into the thick of it, toss it and fling it, tramp through it, shake it in clouds from the trees, tumble and roll in it in sheer delight.

And let us by no means forget to spread a handkerchief upon it that we may see how dirty and how crumpled it will look against that perfect purity.

Thus did we hail its coming. But the miracle was more sudden and the wonder more startling when it came by night. For one thing it was amazing that that bewildering transformation



should have occurred so silently. One would have expected at least a mighty rumbling, a shaking of foundations. But to have no warning whatever, to become aware perhaps as one opened one's eyes of something strange in the quality of the dim light in the room, to leap headlong to the window and wake the household with the reverberations of the great announcement—"Snow! Snow! Snow!" It was like a thunder-clap of good fortune.

And when it went—when it grew heavy, grey and sugary, charged with moisture, when great rents appeared in the garment and vivid grass showed through—when the drive was ploughed into deep mud, and the trees let fall their burdens, we mourned its passing with a keen regret. At last there would be but little patches here and there—the remnant of the drift between the hedges—a shrinking bank behind the wall. We would husband it earnestly to the last. The Snow Man could still be mended as long as a few handfuls of material remained. Even the Snow House must be sacrificed to his superior claim, to keep him going as long as might be. But the end must come. Most tragic of all when rain demolished all the splendour. (Can I not hear

some soulless city man remark "I hope it will change to rain before night," and do I not grieve for him?) For to see all our immeasurable gift washed away in drip and slush and mud, was to taste bitterness indeed.

The muffled sound of wheels. . . . Old John Gardener passing beneath the window, a shovel over his shoulder and a broom in his hand, grumbling (but, of course, he didn't mean it: wouldn't he be the first to lend his old clay pipe and a walking stick for the Snow Man?) . . . A kicking and scraping at the back door where the butcher's boy has arrived. . . . A sudden avalanche off the roof on to the conservatory. . . . A cat floundering in awkward leaps across the lawn. . . . Birds that leave dainty tracks behind them. . . . And always muffled footsteps . . . muffled wheels. Why, even from the nursery window it was a new world.

And when one went forth into the thick of it! At the very outset there was a danger of a flood in the yard where the culvert had got choked. And all about us, lavishly heaped on every side, tons of incomparable material for more good ends than one could think of in a day.

There was the Snow Man of course. He came first, if only from our natural desire to husband and preserve, for when all else was gone he would remain to us for some few days at least—a dwindling pillar. Then the Snow House, hollowed out with spades from a heaped, solid mass. After that perhaps Snow Steps, Snow Statues. And through them all a running fire of Snow Balls. You see there was work for months if only it would last. The one burning question of the day was always—Will it “bind”? Binding snow was a rare but perilous delight. For well we knew that it was thawing. The very fact of its great excellence was also the warning of its impending departure. And feverishly, madly we made the most of it. It was hard indeed to be dragged into the house at all on days of binding snow. Surely to go in for dinner was to allow the petty routine of every day to shackle and confine a festival? Was there not time to eat when it was dark? For meanwhile great cylindrical rolls of white were being pushed to and fro, swelling and crunching as they went, picking up the snow behind them so cleanly as to leave a long green ribbon in their wake, and becoming at last so huge that two or three must push

together, and it was high time they were headed for the slope of the bank, where they might finish ponderously down hill.

And even all that is but the beginning of the tale. There were sledges and toboggans. In the garden much might be done, by using the two banks and making a hard beaten track between them. It must be trampled down, and beaten hard, and—if there was prospect of a frost at night—watered laboriously. Thereafter by careful cultivation and incessant use we would work up the pace (with the toboggan that old John had made) till we could run both banks with ease and far across the bottom lawn. And once, when the conditions had been all in favour and the snow had stayed a week, we were even able to reach the walk at the far side and steer gingerly past the summer-house. Then would we supplement old John's toboggan with a motley crew of other racers—an old tea-tray (which spun slowly round upon its course), a piece of corrugated iron (most obstinate to steer) the shiny leather cushion from the schoolroom sofa (but there was trouble about that). And there were greater tobogganing adventures far afield. There was a reckless course down a steep street, to the terror of the

normal traffic. There were the sand-hills, where slopes were long and smooth, and the speed terrific. . . .

Indeed it is a grievous thing to lose one's taste for snow.



## XVIII

### *FROST*

ONE of the earliest and most painful periods of acute self-denial that I can remember was that during which I was saving up to buy a thermometer. It was not by any means so bad as the time that I broke Miss Jones' umbrella. That was a painful matter altogether. I had broken it in a sense deliberately. That is to say, I had been told not to lean upon it, as it would not stand my weight, and having a different opinion upon that point I had continued to lean upon it with a careless and detached air until it suddenly gave way. Therefore it was ordained that I must pay for the repairs. Miss Jones, I knew, would not have insisted had I been able to get her alone and talk it over with her, but Those in Authority intervened. One and Ninepence it came to, which—with the official pocket-money ruling at sixpence a month—left me a pretty dreary prospect to look forward to. The accumu-

lation of the first shilling was not so bad. I happened to come in for a windfall and besides I had started with a grim determination. But the next sixpence dragged horribly, and, at the last, when I handed in the whole amount, it was with the feelings of an escaped prisoner and with a lively distaste for umbrellas from which I have never quite recovered.

The thermometer was not nearly so bad as that. It was a self-imposed trial for one thing, and the monthly rate had risen to ninepence by then. But it was a big effort all the same. It argued a remarkable firmness of purpose to go forward as I did then, week after week, austere, ascetic, till I had almost forgotten the taste of chocolate cream. But I never regretted it. The truth is that I had begun to mistrust the readings of the thermometer on the wall outside the dining-room window. For one thing it was a full six feet off the ground, and I was convinced that it was also affected by the heat from the room. Anyhow it had stood at 36 one day when ice was forming on the puddles. I could never feel the same faith in it after that.

But when I had my own I soon found it possible to obtain magnificent readings, which quite

put to shame the thermometer upon the wall. If the wind was in the South when the frost came I would put it on the ground in the Field Below where it got the whole force of the blast ; if the frost came from the North I would mount it on the High Trellis. I would consult it at night with a box of matches, and again before breakfast in the twilight. And thus I got it almost at its best. Often in the Twenties. More than once below Twenty. On one memorable occasion as low as 12 degrees. That was in the morning. The morning readings generally beat those taken overnight. One went to bed so deplorably early. Meanwhile that lumbering old instrument on the wall would be dragging along five or six degrees behind, as if unable to believe in the full extent of the glorious dispensation of the frost. Decidedly my money was well invested.

My thermometer was never of the slightest interest to me when it recorded anything over 40 degrees. A comparison of one warm day with another, the difference between the sun and shade temperature simply counted for nothing. All that was as bad as consulting the barometer. It was simply Weather. We had

no interest in weather. But when it got well down into the thirties it began to show prospect of frost, and frost meant Ice.

We longed for its coming with an almost painful anxiety. We did all we could to welcome it. The thermometer, although indubitably the chief of our recording implements, was by no means the only one. My eldest brother pinned his faith to a wet rag, hung on a bush—not too wet, but nicely wrung out to the proper consistency. He would consult it frequently and moisten it at intervals : and at the very first sign of stiffening he would call us all together to rejoice with him. I can see him now as he used to come sadly in to tea shaking his head, after a disappointing inspection. “ Still limp,” he would say, “ still quite limp.” There was another who worked with a shallow bowl or saucer and frequently raised a discussion on the interesting inquiry as to whether boiling water froze quicker than cold water, as we had been told. Another had a tumbler on a chosen spot on the bank, and would bring in—on good mornings—a beautifully shaped cone of ice, not quite solid but with the water locked inside. And there were bottles, of course. If you cork a bottle in the ordinary way and the

frost is keen it will push up the cork some inches at the end of a spoke of ice, in the most delightful manner. And—better still—if you fix the cork firmly enough with wire and there is a really tremendous frost (so we believed, though I must admit we never proved it) it will break! That, of course, is simply the ice trying to get out. You may guess that after a really big night's work, when even the out-of-date old instrument on the wall had spoken of great cold, it was a splendid and most moving thing to sally forth in the white, misty, breathless dawn to visit our devices and count up our gains. Sometimes you could hold out Sidney's rag by one corner, horizontally, like a stick.

And there is white, clear, crackling cat-ice on the puddles . . . and the Pit is skimmed over with a noble sheet . . . and everything is dry and clean and hard . . . and every little twig and blade picked out in white. . . . There are exquisite sprays and branches, pennons and spikes on the windows in the house . . . and a frozen sponge in the bathroom. It is too soon as yet to speak of skating. For no one must venture on the Pit till Old John Gardener has safely walked across it. But, if there be no change by



the afternoon, by Jove, we'll start to make the slide to-night !

By the light of a candle set on the ground, burning serenely in the still air, the walk beyond the lawn was banked at either end. And then back and forth we ran, interminably, with jugs and buckets, from the tap in the pantry, lavishly drenching the whole length of the asphalt. Back and forth from the light and warmth within to the chill, outer air, straining and spilling as we went, and ever encouraged by our chief who would assure us that a little more would do, just a little, and it was actually freezing on already. Thus we would lay up reckless joys—always provided that the rag be not limp and forlorn—for the morrow.

I had a secret method of my own, an impious, pagan method for encouraging the frost. I cannot remember a single occasion on which it bore fruit, but I had a strong faith in it all the same. When first the Pit was coated over, long before old John's first adventurous expedition upon it was even thought of, I would fling out upon the glittering surface a silver coin, secretly and unobserved. One did not part with three-pence without a pang. But I had great faith.

The theory was that thus one tempted Fortune in the hope that one's courage would bring a fit reward. If the frost held till the Pit would bear, I would recover my imperilled offering. And if not it would be lost to me for ever.

## XIX

### *THE GALE*

WEATHER is only of interest to small boys when it becomes startling and aggressive. Generally we took it very much as it came. There was plenty to do in the house when it rained : and we were practically impervious to variations of heat and cold. Indeed, I think we hardly noticed the weather. We never commented on it in the usual course of events. To be able to remark that it is a fine day, when that fact is obvious to any one who cares to look, is essentially a fatuous and grown-up accomplishment. What we demanded of the weather was abnormal situations. We were always hungry for anything that was capable of upsetting the daily tenor of our life, anything that created new conditions, anything that caused confusion and opened up opportunity. When Miss Gardener's younger sister took scarlet fever and a new governess had to be found while she was in quarantine, it was all sheer gain. When

the bow-window was being put in to the nursery and we had to migrate to the spare room, with much hauling back and forth of furniture, we rejoiced exceedingly. It was all so splendidly inconvenient. And when, there being serious illness in the house, one or more of us had to be boarded out in inferior lodgings, hastily acquired, it was magnificent. It is hardly too much to say that we lived in the daily hope of something going wrong. What we wanted was chaos.

In this regard the weather sometimes came to our aid. Snow was, of course, the most valuable dispensation, and frost, while it lasted, kept us in a quivering state of delight. But extreme heat—capable of prostrating Grown-ups—was not to be despised. Thunderstorms, floods and hurricanes and even fog, if it were dense enough, were welcomed with ecstatic glee, in violent contrast to the apprehension of more reasonable beings. Indeed in these matters we cannot be said to have been in sympathy with our parents and guardians, whose relief at the passing of the visitation, great as it was, cannot have been greater than our bitter disappointment.

Especially we disagreed about wind. Grown-up People, even when it wasn't dangerous, always

appeared to find wind irritating and objectionable. Perhaps they resented being banged about : perhaps they did not appreciate losing their hats : possibly they found it difficult, if a shower came on, to steer an umbrella. Of course the truth is that the first use of wind is to bang one about : that there is no more merry sport than chasing a hat, especially among traffic : that an umbrella (contemptible at other times) becomes a splendid instrument of joyous motion if opened out before the gale, so that one has dreams of a conceivable development, if only the wind is strong enough and the umbrella large enough, in which one will be lifted off one's feet, hallooing gloriously.

It was not only in the uses to which it might be put, however, that wind appealed to us. There were days when it seemed to get into one's blood, inspiring, uplifting, lashing one into a frenzy as nothing else would do. The roar of it in the branches . . . the howl of it about the chimney-pots . . . the tearing, rending force, bending and swaying all before it . . . the mad dance of scurrying leaves . . . the whisk and sudden grip of it ! . . . Did it not invite one to rush forth with open arms, with upturned face, deafened and tossed and buffeted, with the breath blown



out of one's mouth and the dust blown into one's eyes—yelling and prancing on a headlong course? It was a fine sensation to brace oneself and peer into the teeth of it: it was a most singular and delightful sensation to turn one's back and lean up against it, boldly adventuring one's weight and sprawling at full length if there came a sudden lull. And there were, of course, plenty of special sports and games that belonged to it. You could mount a sail on the go-cart and tool gaily about the asphalt. You could sport with inflated pillow-cases: and you would not fail to go down to the cliffs to see the tide come in.

And, with any luck, there was pretty sure to be Damage. There were days when even a tour through the streets meant dodging flying chimney pots. One could count on something giving way. There was at every point at least a chance of crashing destruction. Once I met a flying cab, and that was perhaps the greatest event of all. For there is nothing that takes one's breath away like a flying cab—whirled up the street backwards. Even loose slates counted for something in reckoning up the bag.

And then the great question arose of the behaviour of the trellis. It ran between the bleach-

ing green and the kitchen garden and was a full eight feet high. And it was very old and infirm. There had hardly been a notable gale in which the trellis had not sagged and suffered. It had been boosted up a dozen times with fresh supports. And it was morally certain that some day it would come down at a blow in its whole swishing, crackling length. You may guess that we did not mean to miss that moment. As a matter of fact it fell at the last in the middle of the night and we were left with the barren satisfaction of gloating on the wreck.

In the house next door, which had a large expanse of garden, lived an irate old gentleman. He was a great asset. I am convinced that no family of small boys can be considered to have been brought up in circumstance of unfettered opportunity without an irate old gentleman next door. Our feud with him dated from a time when he had deliberately refused to send back tennis balls—although they can have been of no earthly use to him. We watched him from the top of the great wall. We made daring incursions into his territory. Sometimes, with a piece of bread on the end of a string, we fished for his hens. But the matter had never reached the point

of a deliberate complaint to 'Those in Authority, as our relations with the Girls' School on the other side had done more than once. It was the Gale that brought it to a head. We would not have thought of such a thing at any other time, but, as I have said, wind gets into the very blood of a small boy and makes him capable of anything: and so our perennial desire to score off the old gentleman found suddenly a brilliant outlet. I had been tossing up my cap to see how far it would travel, and it sailed high across the wall, and thus the idea came to me. It was a Sunday afternoon and—in contrast to the hurricane outside—peace reigned within the house. There was little chance of being caught. With all the newspapers we could lay hands on we made our way to the top of the wall, clinging on precariously by the ivy. The plan was both beautifully simple and exceedingly amusing. You had but to tear up the papers, roll each piece in a rough ball and toss it high in air, when it was sent flying into the old gentleman's garden. They ran across the lawn, caught in the bushes, some of them hanked long streamers in the trees. Many were held up flapping against the conservatory. Some flew on over the far hedge to decorate the

kitchen garden. One at last caught the sundial (which had been our special objective). Twice we had to send Archie into the house for fresh supplies of material. And by the time we had finished the whole garden lay before us a disgraceful desolation of torn newspaper. *Wouldn't* there be a row!

We went in, meek but triumphant, to nursery tea. We talked as best we could of the ordinary affairs of life. We ate and drank demurely. But all the time we were straining our ears for the signal that was bound to come. We were quite resigned: we had had our fun: had shown the old gentleman what happens to those who retain other people's tennis balls: we had made that garden look a fool. Had we not counted a hundred and twenty-four of our—— Ah, there it was at last! A violent, urgent ringing of the front-door bell.

*DEVICES AND CONTRIVANCES*

FROM the moment when it begins seriously to ape and imitate the behaviour of those who are grown-up childhood loses its savour of spontaneity and surrenders its precious point of view. There was, of course, an earlier imitative age when we copied most assiduously the habits and manners of Those in Authority. But that was a travesty pure and simple. We were not trying to be as they were or to do as they did. We were simply trying to take them off and to show them up. It was a dramatic form of parody. In this spirit one would settle solemnly down to read a vast volume from the library, holding it at an angle to catch the light and laboriously adjusting borrowed pince-nez, or one would shave with the back of a comb, facing the mirror with startling contortions of expression. There were many light-hearted jokes of that sort in vogue. The



calling of cabs, the tipping of waiters, the answering of telephones; the pompous attitude on the hearthrug with back to the fire, based upon Uncle John; the appreciative sipping of port, based upon Uncle Henry—all these were joyously performed. But it is at the time when one begins to think that it might really be of interest to read a book from the library or that it might really be a fine thing to have to shave in sober earnest, that the true spirit of the Golden Age fades rapidly away.

For the guiding principle of boyhood is a wide freedom from all order, conventionality, tradition; a rooted determination not to tread the beaten track, to choose its pursuits for itself and evolve its interests for itself. A boy may be kept within a fairly rigid programme of daily habit in the outward practical life. But all that is to him no more than the inevitable and monotonous framework of his existence. In the chosen enthusiasms that consume his strange, eager little heart he cannot be coerced. He will royally disregard elaborate arrangements for his entertainment, however carefully they may have been prepared, in favour of some queer and seemingly

futile occupation of his own that he had thought of himself, that belonged to himself. I remember the oft-repeated complaint that no one ever knew what I would do next. But I never knew myself. That was why life was so vivid and entrancing. It had no foregone conclusions. It was a long procession of the unexpected and the improbable.

I was always much engrossed with problems of communication by new and original methods. I am now convinced that no one has less aptitude for mechanics or engineering than I. But in those days I wrestled with self-appointed difficulties. There was no reason for it whatsoever. If one did want to send a message from the nursery to the bathroom, the quickest and most direct method was either to go in person or to shout. But I must have my own contrivance for this absurd and inadequate purpose. Even if it could only be laid down when the traffic was suspended, even if it was liable to be pinched when the door swung to, even if the door had to be held open with a chair as long as it was in action, I was well satisfied when I got through my messages—about nothing at all—by speaking tube. I used a telephone later on that could actually be

extended as far as the dining-room, by means of two little drums connected by a string. But I never really cared for that. It had not been my own idea. It smacked of the shop.

But a really fine effect was produced by means of pulleys. And this I elaborated greatly. Even now I cannot quite accept a pulley as a mere mechanical device. I must regard it with a more friendly eye as an engine of adventure and romance. A string was stretched tight from the window of the spare bedroom to the lawn outside, and on this ran a pulley with a small basket depending from it, which could be drawn up and down with a cord. It gave me a fine sense of achievement to sit at the open window, with my accomplice down below, hauling up and letting down all manner of assorted cargoes. Well did I know that if others wished to deposit a cricket ball for any reason—surely the contingency might occur—on the seat beneath the holm-oak, they must pass down two flights of stairs and along the passage and out of the front door, while I could do it in a moment, sitting here. And I took a rich delight in making up the cargo of the most delicate and perishable goods, watches, clocks, a china vase from the drawing-room, to prove the

high efficiency of my means of transit. Pulleys became a wholly absorbing passion for the time. Nearly every upstairs window had its line of communication ; then string gave place to wire, and the distances were increased as I threw out my receiving stations far and wide. The climax was reached when we penetrated to the roof of the potting-shed, and that night the basket swung bobbing down the line with a lighted lantern showing red within, full of suggestion of messages despatched from a besieged citadel, of signals to smugglers in the offing, or of rescues in a stormy sea.

The highly ingenious episode of the mirrors was the outcome, if I remember rightly, of one of those enforced days in the house—with a cold—when one's inventive faculties were put to the test. It probably could not have been carried to a successful issue had not Those in Authority been away from home that afternoon, and that would have been a pity, for I think it will be admitted that it was a thing well worth the doing. It is surprising how many mirrors there are in a house when they are all gathered together. I had no lack of material. My object was to make a perfect chain of vision from the night-nursery,



down two flights of stairs and round three corners, to the store-room in the basement. It took no little delicacy of manipulation, but I built it up one stage at a time from the bottom end, with every mirror tilted so as to gather the reflection of the one before, till at last with a shout of triumph I had the thing complete, and lying on my bed upstairs I could see Colin making faces at me beneath the store-room gas. What unimaginative Grown-up would ever, I ask, have thought of that?

Perhaps it was the mirrors that suggested searchlights and all the grand possibilities of a bright tin lid or piece of glass catching and flashing forth the rays of the sun. It was good fun to make this beam of light travel round the room, illuminating dusty corners and startling unsuspecting persons with a sudden dazzling shock. But it was far better in the open air. And the proudest moment of my brief career in the great world of signals, messages and communications was when I found myself in a ferry-boat far out in the river and by preconcerted arrangement could see and glory in the flashes of my accomplice in the garden on the hill two miles away.



I am only at a loss to understand why all this early promise should have come to nought, and why Marconi and the rest should now have the field entirely to themselves.

## XXI

### *WHEN THE BURGLARS CAME*

It actually happened : there was no make-believe about it. It was probably the most tremendous event of our whole childhood, the most staggering, suggestive, romantic. It was a whole chapter out of a real detective story enacted before our very eyes. It brought the Burglar home to us as a real criminal who broke into the real houses of real people. He was no longer a glorious abstraction, like the Pirate and the Brigand. Furthermore, it completely upset the ordinary tenor of our life, and anything that was capable of doing that was always welcomed with glee ; and it gave us fine thrills of terror which added much to the spice of existence. It was a time of awestruck whispers, of solemn conclaves, of dark surmises and sinister reflection. I suppose that Grown-up Persons must have found it a time of anxiety and annoyance, but it meant so much to the nursery that surely on balance

the household may be said to have gained rather than lost by the visitation. Besides, all the stolen goods were recovered—which was rather disappointing from our point of view and savoured of anti-climax.

The real hero among us was Sidney, who came out of the affair with flying colours, regarded with envious eyes for the part that he had played. It is true that he had slept through the crisis and known nothing of it till the morning, but at least he alone had come into actual contact with the housebreakers. He slept at that time on the ground floor, and they must have looked in upon him while engaged upon their unholy activities, for they had—and it just shows how much they feared him as an opponent—they had actually *locked him in*! His first knowledge of the Event was when he found himself a prisoner in the morning. But the fun had begun before that. It began at 6.30 a.m., with the hysterics of the cook—and no wonder. For these dreadful men, in a spirit of reckless levity, had actually fixed up a sort of scarecrow on the kitchen table before taking their departure.

There followed an hour of panic and amazement, of running up and down stairs, of fetching assist-

ance, of proclaiming conflicting theories, of heated argument and general confusion. And after that the thrilling period of investigation and discovery. It is not to be supposed that we were allowed to be present while this was in progress. After a hasty toilet, in which we must assist each other, for no outside help was to be looked for, we were kept safely out of the way as far as possible by a distracted under-nurse, from whom little information could be elicited. But a scout would escape from time to time, and as the first startling facts came to light the report of them soon filtered through to us. We were enormously impressed at the very outset by the serious, set purpose of these desperate men, who had actually removed the cake and laid it carefully upon the pantry shelf while abstracting the silver basket in which it had reposed. We felt at once that these were no ordinary pilferers, else they had hardly left that noble cake behind. They had taken five coats from the front hall! They had taken the Money-boxes—Our Money-boxes!—from the shelf in the library. At this point a more rigid censorship was established. We must, it seemed, eat our breakfast (just as on any ordinary day) and ask no more questions.

But despite all efforts to suppress our legitimate curiosity we managed to find out in the course of the day, by a variety of means, most of the known facts and to piece them together to our complete satisfaction. Much was picked up by overhearing indiscreet servants imparting the latest information to one another. Something, but not very much, was picked up by pumping Old John Gardener, who, by the way, had become a person of enormous importance—consulting with policemen, investigating upon his own account, dismissing with asperity the reporter of the local paper, generally overlooking operations.

As each new fragment of information came to us a whispered consultation would take place upon the nursery sofa in a white heat of excitement. They had got in by the kitchen window (quite an easy feat, as we knew well); they had broken one of the teaspoons to see if it was silver (experts without a doubt). They had taken the big epergne with the stags on it (pity that that should go into the pot, for no doubt they would melt it down). There was a strong impression (quite unsupported by evidence) that they had been armed with revolvers. Finally there was



the dramatic incident of the desk in the library. That was the climax of the story, and even to this day the patched desk remains to tell the tale. A part of the lid had been chipped away with a chisel (or let us hope with some more unholy tool, known only to the profession), but before it had been forced open an interruption must have occurred. They had fled, with the job but half complete, and there was no doubt that the desk contained an enormous sum of money.

There were already three separate theories in the field as to where they had surmounted the wall, but a splendid clue had been discovered in the shrubbery by Old John Gardener. (What a man he was for a job of this sort !) There could be seen footprints, no less, guarded by a policeman, and covered by a plank, lest they should be effaced. This was where they had stood watching the light in the night-nursery till it went out and the moment came for action. We shuddered when we thought of that silent vigil beneath our very windows, picturing to ourselves these two abandoned men (fingering revolvers) approaching their nefarious work. Later a part of the blade of a broken penknife came to light in the kitchen window. Here was a certain clue. We

should be all right now. And yet one might have hoped that they had forced the window with something more professional than a penknife. It ought to have been a jemmy. We began to feel that they were losing caste. It was rumoured that the policeman had already spoken of them as mere amateurs.

After the first excitement had gone by and life had resumed its normal lines we had the greatest difficulty in gathering any further information. It was adjudged best that we should be kept in ignorance and allowed to forget the disturbing episode. No one would tell us anything of the chase and the capture. No one would even refer to the Event. Except that Sidney now slept upstairs, everything went on as before. But after a time stray-facts escaped the censor. There was some talk of a landlady who, peering through a keyhole, had thought it strange to see "silver stags" on the floor of the room; and of one miscreant who had basely left his accomplice in the lurch, with a heavy trunk to transport by night, and vanished. And then the lost property reappeared. It was all over then? Not quite. For a full month later came the news that the absconding accomplice had been taken in a city in

the Midlands—with the broken penknife in his pocket ! But we could never make a coherent story of the sequel. We were cruelly starved of information, and could only surmise the course of events, picture to ourselves the great scene at the trial, and guess at the length of the sentence.

After all, it was perhaps as well that we should begin to think of something else. It was a glowing, thrilling episode. It made a magnificent story. For some time it cast a halo of romance about us in our dealings with the children in the house opposite. But these great gains were not attained without a price. It was not pleasant to dream of burglars. It became the custom to leave the gas on until one was asleep. For a time one did not go alone into the garden after dark ; and if one happened to wake in the night a disturbing vision would immediately present itself—of two masked figures in the shrubbery below.

*PAINS AND PENALTIES*

THERE was nothing drastic, nothing forcible about the forms of punishment which chiefly appealed to Those in Authority, and which I am to suppose contributed their quota to the formation of the character that I now possess. Far be it from me to attribute to these methods any measure of success in that endeavour, if one is to judge them only by results. But I have always held them in high esteem, both for their perfect simplicity and for the undoubted mastery with which they obtained their immediate object. Castigation, fine or imprisonment would have been, I know, more easily endured, and therefore less effective than this admirable and artless system of punishment by boredom. It was nothing more than a forced pause in the headlong course of one's life, the imposition of a period of inactivity, uneventfulness, and therefore intolerable dulness. In later life it may well be

that one would find it no great hardship to have to sit for an hour on a chair and do nothing—indeed, I think there are days with some of us when we would gladly welcome such a programme were there anyone of a sufficient authority to enforce it. But it was not so then. And to be sent to bed an hour before one's usual time would to many of us now be a luxury and a satisfaction. Then one regretted bitterly that one lost hour which could never be recovered.

The punishment of sitting on chairs was derived, it may be, from the ancient institution of the stocks ; certainly it was related to it, in that one was thereby subjected to the jibes and sarcasm of the passer-by. If one had a brother engaged at the time on any engrossing or exciting pursuit it was natural that he should bring it into the room where one was thus detained and spread it forth and gloat over it ; while through the open window came joyous shouts of freedom, hardly called for by the nature of the occasion. And there one sat with set teeth and clouded brow, going through with it to the best of one's poor ability, trying to concentrate one's ever-wandering thoughts upon some subject that would help the time to pass, trying above all not



to look at the clock ; though ever and anon one's eyes would be drawn there by a dreadful fascination. The jaunty and casual air with which one had taken up one's position had barely outlasted the first five minutes : it had been followed by a state of wriggling impatience that grew ever in intensity. Of course a whole hour was a tremendous sentence—I fancy it was equivalent to about three months' hard labour in later life—and no bird escaping from the fowler's snare can have felt a greater relief and exultation than the prisoner when at last the minute hand would creep round again to its starting-place and he could kick the chair away and scamper forth.

To be sent to bed an hour before one's time carried with it a certain sting that added greatly to its mortification. It was not so much a question of it being before the usual time, as of it being before one's small sister. That was an indignity, an encroachment upon one's just rights. But quite apart from that it was terrible to have the day cut short. I like to think of that and to remember that there was a time when every separate day was a special gift and a vast opportunity, when it was a poignant loss to have it even thus curtailed. But on those occasions

when I was the victim of this sad experience there came at last to me a certain fortunate philosophy which was infinitely comforting. For I reflected that the sooner I was safe in bed and sound asleep (and the two were almost simultaneous) the nearer I had come to To-morrow. In a way one might count the episode, if one reflected calmly, as a gain. For one was actually nearer by a whole hour than those others, still downstairs, to To-morrow. And splendid as To-day had been it was never comparable with To-morrow.

The dreadful experience of sitting on chairs reached its climax on a memorable Saturday when we had forgotten that one of Those in Authority would return from the office early in the afternoon instead of after tea. I know not how it came about that the moated castle we had built was allowed to degenerate into a pool of liquid mud, or which of us it was that had conceived the idea of playing a new form of hunt-the-slipper in its horrid depths, but when the sport was at its height the gate from the Field Below opened and we remembered—that it was Saturday. We were caught, one might say with literal truth, red-handed. The sentences were very heavy,

as was inevitable, and on the same evening, when they were carried out, every sitting-room in the house was requisitioned, and for a silent hour each held its wriggling victim on a chair. So fully was the available space occupied indeed that Sidney was relegated to the summer-house ; and I, who was only " doing half-an-hour," on the theory that I had been led astray, had at least the satisfaction of adjourning there, when my own time was up, and making faces at him through the window.

A sort of combination of these two forms of punishment was tried once, I remember, on a Sunday when we escaped from going to church by hiding in the rhubarb. It was not that we objected to church in any special degree ; it was rather that we could not resist the rhubarb, which at that time had grown long and rank and splendidly dense. It was such a perfect hiding-place that we had only to find an adequate reason for hiding, and to escape from church did as well as any other. It was splendid to hear people calling one's name within a few yards of where one lay, when one could actually peer out and see their legs. And when all was still we crept forth and began to wonder and discuss " how

long we would get." It was decreed that we go to bed in the afternoon ! But that as a punitive experiment failed of its object. It was an innovation, and therefore interesting. It was almost an adventure. To be in bed in broad sunshine, when one was quite well ! It was altogether too amusing a situation to depress.

But by far the most effective form of punishment to which we were subjected was the dread Apology. It is hard in later life—it is, I think, especially hard for newspaper editors and Members of Parliament—to apologize. It is almost impossible, in my experience, for a small boy. Well do I remember a hideous day of dark rebellion when this awful task was put upon me. We had been throwing snowballs at the pupils next door as they came out two by two from the gate of Olinda and one at least had found its billet. I was adjudged the culprit, not because I was the eldest, nor yet because I had first thought of it, but because I alone had succeeded, where all had tried, in hitting the mark. And that rankled deeply. It was decreed that I call on the Lady Principal and apologize. For the rest of that day I was torn and tortured by a strange and mordant shame. I shunned the rest of the

company and brooded in seclusion. And then with a sort of wild unthinking dash I seized my cap and ran, never stopping for a moment till I had pulled the bell. In broken, half-defiant tones I got it over. The lady, to my great surprise, made little of it, and talked of the pleasure of snowballing, and asked me to stay to tea. I think she understood what I had been through. And I returned an hour later with a calm and equal mind. But the incident had scored itself deep upon my fickle memory. I never now throw snowballs at girls' schools.



## XXIII

### *THE BEAST IN THE HEDGE*

I BEGIN to relate at last the true story of the Beast, in the certain and depressing knowledge that it will not and cannot be believed by any rational person. To the reader it must ever be that least satisfactory form of narrative, a mystery without an explanation. In cold matter of fact, it may appear to many something worse than that—an untrue statement quite unsupported by proof. I am afraid I cannot help that. Childhood is so full of mystery, of unreality, of questions without an answer, of effects without cause, and a child lives so completely in a realm of fantasy, that for myself I have ever freely accepted the Beast as a phenomenon belonging to the Golden Age, and quite in harmony with the magic atmosphere of a world that was new every morning.

I do not so much mind being told that the whole thing was a figment of our imagination—

though I do not believe it for a moment—but I will not be told that our Beast was a weasel, a fox, a cat, a badger, or any other known quadruped, for it was not. And, further, I will not be told that it had escaped from a menagerie. Have I not diligently searched the Zoo and found there nothing even remotely like it?

The affair of the Beast stamped itself upon my memory as a splendid and vivid incident, a revelation to be treasured in retrospect, and shared with my two companions as an experience that belonged to us alone. We have always shunned prosaic explanations and belittling solutions of the problem. For we are severely loyal to our Beast. We are quite clear that there is nothing to explain. If it *was* Magic—well, I suppose we may let it go at that. It only remains to relate the whole history of the affair from my own recollection of it, which is perfectly adequate to the smallest detail.

We were playing—we three—on the lawn at the foot of the garden one bright and sunny afternoon, when the air was full of the sour, sappy smell of fresh-cut grass and the stillness of the lazy hour was over all things. There was a short, steep bank leading down to the bottom

lawn, which was bounded by the Walk and the old thorn hedge. Immediately beyond the hedge was a four-foot wall of stone, marking the drop to the level of the Field Below, and in the roots of the hedge were holes and crannies where one could crawl in and lie invisible from either side. It was a favourite hiding-place, and we were familiar with every yard of it. We had for the moment finished our game—a sort of development of croquet with the added spice of interest supplied by pitching the hoops on the slope of the bank, for we were ever incapable of playing any game according to its accepted rules—and we were resting listlessly upon the steps, when we were startled by a sound.

I am at a loss quite how to describe it, though I believe that I could still imitate it faithfully. Something between a cough and a bark, let us say, but very minute and unassuming. Yet it arrested our attention, and we were all three looking straight at the hedge when the Beast appeared. It hopped up from the lower level among the roots, resting its forefeet upon the turf; perhaps I should say it “bobbed” up, just as one has seen a stoat rising in the grass to listen. There it was in the full light of day,

looking straight at us. For some few seconds it remained motionless, taking in the situation, then it shook its head, sprang up on to the turf, ran along the hedge with a sort of eager, pattering gallop, looking neither to the right nor the left, for about thirty yards, paused for a moment, and dived back again out of sight. There had been nothing alarming about its appearance, and we lost no time in rushing over to the spot where it had gone out of sight. Diligently we searched the hedge and the Field Below, prodding in all the crevices and turning up the fallen leaves. But we found no trace. The Beast had vanished. I have never met with it again, and I do not expect to do so. But I know that should it ever come across my path I shall have no difficulty whatever in recognizing it.

And now I must describe it—and here you will laugh at me. It was perhaps eighteen inches in length, and its colour was of a foxy red. It gave one, when running along the hedge so that one had a full side view, a strong impression of being tapered off. That is to say, it fell away in a sort of wedge-shape, from a bold head and shoulders to a small, sloping back, weak little hind-legs, and a sleek, dwindling tail like a rat. I am in



difficulties when I come to describe its head and face, for while it bore a very close resemblance to a full-grown lion—there is no question about its mane, which was very clearly marked—there was somehow about it (I know it is absurd) a strong suggestion of a horse. Perhaps I cannot put it more clearly than to say that while it had the features of a lion it had the *expression* of a horse. It shook its head curiously. There was nothing, as I have said, alarming or savage in its aspect. Rather was it a merry little beast, extraordinarily active and alert. Its coat would appear to have been rough rather than sleek, and it was well proportioned in its way. The only point that seemed incongruous was its feeble little tail. I am afraid I can say no more of its bark. We only heard it once and then quite indistinctly.

It is a preposterous story, is it not? I hope no one will waste time on any fruitless efforts at identification. Rather take it from me that this beast cannot be whittled down and classified—that that was simply how it *was*. As soon as it had disappeared, we returned to the bank and sat down to face the situation. First we must compare notes as to our various impressions.



On all leading points we were entirely agreed. It was the same thing that we had seen. There was some slight discussion upon the question of the tail, one of us likening it rather to that of a cat. The tail I have given, I should explain, is my own tail. But there were no other disagreements. The question then arose as to "what we were to do about it." The matter was one of tremendous importance, and we must decide upon some common line of action before we mixed again with our fellow-men. And here the eldest and wisest of the trio declared our line of conduct. We must keep it dark, he said. It was no use. We would not be believed. We would certainly be laughed at. He for one was not going to subject himself to that. We knew what we knew. Let us keep it to ourselves. And for some years the secret was loyally kept. I think my relations with my two accomplices owed a good deal to the Beast. It was a powerful bond between us, and in later life when the time came when we confessed the incredible experience we were always ready to support and corroborate each other.

Even now that strange, glowing, common memory remains. My two accomplices have

travelled far since then, and in the course of their journey they have no doubt, like others, found something of disillusionment, much to call forth scepticism. But I know well that even now either of them will readily endorse this statement that I have made—save, perhaps, in the matter of the tail ; there I must be allowed to hold my own opinion. It belongs to the category of a clear and definite experience. They are loyal as ever to the memory of the Beast. And let me ask my reader ere he dismiss with contempt this humble narrative, has he not also, if he will pause and search for it, some treasured memory of years ago, that is akin to this of mine ; some vivid, clear experience that he cannot defend which yet would leave behind a certain sense of loss were it explained away ?

*THE COMING OF COURTESY*

THE assimilation of new ideas may be regarded as the chief business and occupation of the nursery. The tram conductor's method of sharpening a pencil, the trick of the butcher's boy of wearing his cap backwards, Old John Gardener's red handkerchief, Uncle Henry's violent method of blowing his nose—each of these was in its turn matter for consideration; each had to be weighed, and either dismissed as impracticable or incorporated forthwith among one's daily habits. From every side and through all manner of different channels new ideas kept presenting themselves with bewildering rapidity, and while many of them were no doubt accepted quite unconsciously, others must be subjected to a deliberate process of examination before they could be confidently adopted, often with grave searchings of soul.

To no small extent one's conduct and deportment were, of course, shaped and modified by coercion from without. At every turn one came up against a certain meaningless code of small restrictions, known as Manners. It was no use fighting against that. Purely with a view to a quiet life, you had to make concessions there; and this was all the more easily done as the demands made upon you in this respect were of a wildly unmeaning nature—sufficiently annoying no doubt to one who preferred to choose his own course even in the smallest details, but perfectly harmless in themselves. Really if it gave Those in Authority any pleasure to see you taking soup noiselessly and by small instalments, you would hardly care to make a fuss about it. Your attitude was akin to that of the smiling prize-fighter who was belaboured by his wife and family: "It pleases them, and it doesn't hurt me." Again, since they preferred to make a special point of it, you could no doubt find other and more subtle methods of conveying your exasperation than by slamming the door. That was better in the long run than the humiliating exercise, often repeated, of coming back and shutting it quietly.

It was by more or less conscious imitation for the most part that one fashioned one's ever-varying conduct and behaviour. But it seems to me, as I look back upon it, that the process was a very curious one, obscure and indirect. For it was not by observation of Grown-up Persons that hints of value could be obtained. They belonged clearly to a different world, wholly artificial and remote, governed by no comprehensible laws, and only to be imitated in a spirit of hilarious ridicule. Their actions were for the most part unaccountable and their habits were generally to be honoured in the breach. And yet as time went on one was approaching more and more to their standards without directly admitting the soundness of them. It was as if their customs and observances had to filter down from the higher level to the lower through some channel that we could accept and understand. Thus we would never have dreamed of admiring the view from the drawing-room windows simply because we had invariably heard it admired by visitors, but if the boy in the house opposite (who had been to London) expressed any satisfaction in the prospect one had to reconsider one's attitude. There



might well be something admirable in it after all.

It was an enormous work of civilization amounting almost to a complete reversal of our whole outlook upon life that was compassed by these means within a few short years. The dark age of barbarism, when Grown-ups were a race apart, when girls were a negligible and inferior order of being, when might was right, when refinement was the outward sign of weakness and effeminacy (all very well for girls), must give place to consideration for other people, to some measure of gentleness, even to some measure of humility. But the process was not carried out imperceptibly or even by gradations. Rather was it in the nature of a series of sharp shocks.

There was a time when clean finger-nails were not only a wholly unnecessary adornment but in themselves a folly and extravagance. They savoured of foppery. They aroused direct opposition in the mind of one who took a vigorous and healthy view of life. I remember when it seemed to me, quite honestly, that a hand in which each nail was monotonously clean and

symmetrically pared could hardly be looked upon as the hand of a man, in the best sense. And it distressed me to find this miserable foible adopted by one whom I whole-heartedly admired for many excellent qualities, not the least of them his ability to turn cart-wheels and his startling skill in making paper windmills. I remember reflecting upon the strange mixtures that one met with in human character. I supposed I must overlook it, try to forget it. But what a thundering good fellow he would have been had he not fallen into this sad weakness !

There came a day when I found my cousin Peter, older by some years than I and no small hero in my eyes, lustily plying a nail-brush. This was a direct challenge. I remonstrated with him, jeered at him. I pursued him for the rest of the day with sarcastic comments, and I was so far successful that he gave up the practice for a time. But he soon returned to it, and was not again to be shaken from his resolve. And for a while I was as one who had lost a friend and ally. It was to me as if he had gone over to the enemy, and I could view it in no other light. He had practically admitted the justice of the tyrannous and op-

pressive code beneath which we lived. He had taken up his stand as the champion of Manners. Yet I could not hold out. I would find myself looking furtively at my own hands in odd moments. I was no longer quite satisfied about them. I began to wonder what they would look like if I—as a mere jest—were also to cleanse and pare my nails. And at last, one evening when the coast was clear, shamefacedly I crept into the bathroom.

Thus also came the rudiments of Courtesy, as a new revealing light upon our path. For myself I remember vividly the moment of its coming and the shock that I sustained. I cannot date any startling change in my way of life from that hour ; the new pervading influence worked slowly, and it is only too probable that its mission is not now complete. Yet it was a sudden conversion, shattering my former ideals, setting up fresh standards in their place.

Sidney, my eldest brother, had been spending a whole summer holiday with Uncle John in Ireland, and had come back with a bewildering wealth of new habits, new pursuits, new expressions with which to permeate the nursery. We were playing rounders in the Field Below and it

so happened that, in taking a drive at a full-pitch, he hit me with some force in the eye. It was excruciatingly painful, but I forgot the pain in a moment in sheer amazement at his subsequent behaviour. For he strode up to me at once, put a hand upon my shoulder, and—said he was sorry! He—to me! Now we had of course learned the use of the perfunctory apology in dealing with Grown-up Persons. It was employed glibly enough if one trod on the toe of a caller. But that was only Manners. That an accidental injury inflicted upon one of your brothers could possibly call for any expression of regret (beyond that of telling him he was a fool for getting in the way) was so astounding a discovery that I could only continue the game as one in a dream, and sought solitude in the potting-shed as soon as it was over. There I sat on an upturned box wrestling with this new situation. Had it been anyone else I should have laughed it to scorn. But Sidney could not be wrong. If he had done it, it must—incredible though it might seem—nevertheless be the *right thing to do*.

When at last I came in to tea I was no longer satisfied that my former way of life had been so

perfect as I had believed it to be. I was face to face with a new vista in human relationships. I was beginning to suspect that I should have to start all over again.



*IN THE TRAIN*

I THINK there was no date in all the year, not even Christmas Day, that stood for so much in the estimation of the nursery as that of the migration in July from England to the North. And yet I do not believe that we looked much beyond it to the weeks that were to follow, the summer weeks of freedom and the endless days packed full with vivid interests far afield. Rather was the central object of our burning expectation the journey and the train. For myself I may safely say that there was only one night in the year when sleep forsook me, except when I fell a tossing victim to the toothache, and that was on the eve of this, our annual departure. It was idle to attempt to compose for slumber a mind so ardently ablaze with bright anticipations. We would seem to have chosen quite capriciously the proper opportunities for festival, and I cannot remember that the journey home in October

ever ranked as one of them. But the journey in July loomed large in the imagination weeks ahead.

I sometimes wonder just how we would have regarded the modern corridor express had such been our conveyance in those days. No doubt to move along the passage, and especially to cross from one coach to another—where it clanks underfoot—would have been no mean adventure. To lunch in the dining-car would have been of course tremendous, were it permitted. But it is more than likely that that would not have been in the programme; at least it must not be reckoned on. Again, it would be very good to enter the guard's van simply by opening a little door—there is often a dog there, chained to the wall and longing for companionship, a calf in a sack, or a hamper full of fowls, besides the piled luggage, well worth investigating in itself. Yet on consideration I strongly incline to the belief that though for those of riper years the corridor train may be a vast advance in travelling methods, for small boys it is in no way to be compared with the old system of separate carriages. For the essence of the thing was the splendid isolation of one's reserved compartment. Here was a seething train, full of restless, hurrying

persons, a heterogeneous crowd, drawn out, as it were, into a long thread and packed away into their seats. And in the very heart of the confusion was our place of refuge, reserved by means of a beautiful blue ticket with our name writ large upon it, where none might break in upon us. For those few hours while the gay world slipped by on either side it was as much our own as the cupboard under the stairs, except for the presence of Authority, and even more inviolate, for did not a cheerful guard come up and lock us in?

The better to mark the great occasion, which was to be equipped with every luxury, we had set to work some weeks before to save up sweets. Sundry sticks of chocolate-cream fell in one's way in the ordinary course of life, and Those in Authority kept a store in the dining-room side-board of other welcome—if all too wholesome—sweetmeats, which were doled out at proper seasons. Sometimes we had a penny or two to spend: occasionally we gained possession of divers pieces of preserved ginger at dessert. There were many sources of supply; and when all these, with splendid self-denial, were set aside in a cardboard box in one of the drawers in the

spare bedroom (for who would ever think of looking there?) they made a notable agglomeration by the time the day arrived; so that upon the journey one could really have enough, and no need to consider every mouthful with reference to the next. But sweetmeats were not the only form of hoarded treasure. If anything of note in those few weeks had come our way as like as not we had obeyed the instinct to "save it for the train." I, who had a birthday some few days before, was always well equipped, and each of us would bring his contribution—of a new whistle (most appropriately used on entering into tunnels), a new knife (not to be employed upon the Company's property), or a new paint-box, with which one could do no more than test the colours with a licked finger, for lack of water. But quite apart from all these occupations, there was always lots to do in a train.

We had to find out in the first place whether, supposing we had not got a ticket, it would be possible to travel under the seat, as people do in books. Then that notice on the edge of the racks is in itself a challenge. They are not to be employed for heavy luggage? Well and good. But what constitutes heavy luggage? Does Archie?



Let's try him. Those racks are a good deal stronger than the Company makes out. And then there are the stations, and Archie must be allowed a place at the window to draw an engine, before the train starts again, and Colin wants to have some friendly badinage with his special chum, the guard; and I must buy a newspaper for a table-cloth—a penny is always allowed for that—for lunch time is at hand. And there is always the open question for debate as to "how quick she is going." One must pause to listen to the engine tugging on the way up Shap, and to watch the fences fly past on the way down. Then there are those bewildering telegraph wires which keep rising and falling and flowing along all the time, with a sort of twinkle at every post. Best of all there is the secret interchange of messages with the servants in the carriage behind. That is magnificent. You write the message on a scrap of paper and tie it firmly to a piece of string, and then it is paid out into the whistling gale by slow degrees until one feels a tug that indicates that it has safely come to hand. It is not at all unlike deep-sea fishing.

Then there is one point, and only one, where you can catch a glimpse of the sea. That is not



a thing to miss, nor the big viaduct near Lowgill, nor the Border. That is a climax. It is customary to begin talking broad Scotch at once when it is passed. But the real train-game, of which I know well we had by no means a monopoly, is a sedentary, almost intellectual form of sport. It filled a useful place in the latter part of the journey, when your more explosive energies had abated and you were at last content to sit still. We had elaborated the simple outlines of this time-honoured device for keeping children quiet on a journey till we felt we had in a measure made it our own. It was played by two teams of two players each, stationed at the opposite windows, thus occupying all four corners of the compartment, and the winning side was that which reached a hundred first. The umpire, who had to act promptly at either side, hovered feverishly between. I cannot exactly undertake to remember the code in detail, but I think the points scored were something like the following. For a cow, *one*—there were always lots of cows; for a dog, *three*; for a wind-mill, *ten*; for a carriage and pair, *twelve*. These were the ordinary counters, the pawns in the game. But there were also prizes of far greater value. Thus, for a black

sheep, *twenty* ; for a white horse looking over a gate, *forty-five* ; for a donkey, *fifty* ; and for a flock of sheep on the road, *Game* !

And so the last hour slipped away, till we found ourselves in the country that we knew. At each fresh landmark there were shouts of keen excitement at the windows such as even a white horse looking over a gate had not evoked. And then we found we were slowing down, the last bridge resounded hollow beneath us, familiar cries were heard, the train drew up, and the Scotch guard with the great red beard came, key in hand, to set us free. I think the shepherd with a collie at his feet who took our place in the empty carriage would hardly get so much out of his journey as we had done. We thought he looked rather bored and weary as he settled in his corner, and I fear he did not understand as we did the art of travel ; for there is plenty to do in a train.

## XXVI

### *ABOUT BEING IN THE MIDDLE*

I ONCE met one old gentleman who understood. He lifted from me in a moment all that sense of injustice, of harsh treatment at the hands of Fate, which I had been harbouring in secret. He left me with a memory which served to drive it out in the time to come. He even elevated my dreary intermediate state to a special significance, and gave it a new value in my eyes. For it is, without question, something of a tragedy of childhood—to be in the middle.

I know now, on looking back, that it was only for a few months, when the two cliques on either side hardened their hearts against me, that I had any real grievance on this score. But the peculiar tribulations of that period left their sting behind, and I must have got into the habit whenever I found myself (from any cause) left out in the cold, of blaming this sinister accident

of my birth, until I had elevated it into a prime misfortune.

The "Big Ones" and the "Little Ones" each contrived somehow to fall into a distinct group, and if there were any good things going they were pretty sure, as it seemed to me, to get hold of them between them. The whole family was much too large a unit for most purposes. It must be divided, but when the division was made there was pretty sure to be a bit left over in the middle—and I was the bit. To the Christmas parties where one played Blind-Man's-Buff and where there was a conjurer or private theatricals, went the Big Ones. To the Christmas parties where one played Hunt-the-Slipper and where there was a tree and large supplies of sponge-cake fingers, went the Little Ones. But there appeared to be few Christmas parties that fitted my case. The Big Ones to a great extent had their own interests and occupations, in which I was too small and insignificant to take part. The Little Ones resented my intrusion into their own special games and secret delights, knowing very well that I would consider them altogether too silly for one of my years. In the first case my rôle was that of a panting hanger-on, who could

never quite keep up and who ran much risk of being sent about his business : in the second that of a superior critic, always ready to tender advice which was not wanted, and usually much better out of the way. Of course even in that dark winter I had my days—great days when I was smiled on by my superiors in return for some brilliant suggestion that they had seen fit to adopt, when I myself became to all intents and purposes a Big One, tasting rare joys of supremacy. There were also days when, descending to the lower scale, I was adopted for the time being as leader and chief of the Little Ones. But for the most part I was out of it. And the worst of it was that a sort of alliance between Big and Little was not altogether unknown. There were times when the two groups were on the friendliest terms, one simply exuding admiration, the other showing a beautiful and most self-conscious condescension. They were so far apart as to be mutually attractive to each other, but I was much too like them both. Had the programme of our upbringing been quite consistent and every one of us passed in a steady rotation through each successive phase it would not have been so bad. But new ideas were sometimes adopted, generally



after I had passed the stage to which they applied. The Big Ones were of course continually reaching a new stage of some sort—a later bed-time, an extension of bounds, a private sponge, school-room tea. These privileges also fell to me in due course, but somehow they had grown a little stale by then. I should have had no cause of complaint had those below me followed strictly on the same lines. But variations would be adopted. The statutory bed-time was put back half an hour, for instance, the statutory pocket-money was advanced, an entirely new departure was made in the important matter of the cake supply for nursery tea—after I had been drafted to the schoolroom. There was no real injustice in these things. They were in themselves valuable amendments. But while the Big Ones were already too far on to take much interest in them, I knew well that I had only just missed them. It was not fair !

Often would I brood upon the things that were not fair, and more and more I came to attribute them to my intermediate position. On one such occasion, when two separate parties had left me alone and desolate in the nursery, I made a startling discovery, which emphatically

was not fair. I was the only one, if you came to think of it, who never had any new clothes. My little sister had in that particular the immense weapon of her sex to defend her. But my small brother was coming off nearly as well. For most of my garments descended, in a more or less impaired condition, from those above and the trouble was that by the time I had done with them they were of no use whatever to anyone else. I even went so far that night as to plan a special method by which I might bring home to Archie the fact that whoever had claim to new clothes he had none. I would start taking such scrupulous care of my garments that when I had grown out of them they would still be fit for active service. *Then* he would have to wear them. That plan, like most of the others that I conceived to mitigate my unfortunate position, came to naught. There was no cure for it till the coming of the old gentleman. And that was a most extraordinary and epoch-making event.

The old gentleman was absolutely right in every way. I looked back upon him afterwards as one decorated with a halo of perfection. He was the only Grown-up I had ever known in whom I could not suggest improvement. He came

from Australia and he had a unique faculty for understanding things. He only came once, and after he had finished his visit to the drawing-room, instead of going quietly out of the house, as did other visitors, he dashed upstairs, three steps at a time, and opened the door of the nursery. He must have found it by instinct, as he had no one to guide him. But he was quite equal to that. In he came, sat down on the sofa and joined at once in the conversation in the most natural way. At the end of three-quarters of an hour we had practically accepted him as one of ourselves, and were even making use of him (for he was very tall) to lift down sundry of our belongings which, having been used as missiles in the course of a bombardment of Alexandria, had lodged on the top of the high cupboard out of reach. But the astounding thing happened at the moment of his departure—for he was sorry he could not stay to tea.

“Which is the middle one?” he demanded suddenly, as he took his hat. And when I had claimed that position, “Will you come and see me off at the station?”

We crept noiselessly past the drawing-room, he with his finger on his lip (oh, he knew all

about it ! ) ; and he did not help me on with my coat and pat my cap about and wonder if I ought to have a muffler, as others were wont to do. On the way to the station he discoursed at length upon this one engrossing subject of being in the middle. He understood. He revealed the cheering fact that he had been in the middle himself—and look how well he had turned out ! And had he had no fun ?—not a bit. He was only the middle of three, which was not, of course, such an extreme case as mine. But his elder brother had got the estate, and his younger sister had married a baronet, and he was simply packed off to a place called the Antipodes. So you see ! But he went on to show that he had really had the best of it in the long run. *Middle Ones always do.* I was to buck up, he said, and always remember that it was a general rule in families that the best stuff was found in the middle. “I know all about it,” he concluded, “the Big Uns put on too much side, don’t they ? And the Little Uns are so abominably spoiled, eh ? ”

And when he left me at the station he bestowed upon me a tip of such staggering dimensions (gold ! ) that I went home in a car for fear

of being robbed, and did not dare to show myself in the nursery till I had discounted the extremes of jealousy beforehand by laying out a liberal part of it on chocolate-cream for the public good.



## XXVII

### *SECRET HABITATIONS*

THE prehistoric man within us dies slowly. With some of us he is never wholly dead, but still may make his pleading heard, calling us back to the time when the instincts of the savage played no small part in guiding our activities. Or whence comes this overmastering desire, that is known to every small boy, for a hidden house or home, a camp or habitation that shall be all his own? A little girl's idea of "playing house" is something far different. It is wholly conventional, and consists of an elaborate imitation in every detail, as far as may be, of the genuine thing as she knows it. She must mark off the rooms with stones laid down in a laborious outline. She must put in the bed (draped in a folded handkerchief), the table (of an upturned box), and chairs and sofas, each in its allotted place. She will have the dishes ranged upon the dresser, poker and tongs displayed upon the hearth, a basin on

the wash-stand, and a pillow on the bed. She is satisfied with the most feeble and inadequate means to these ends so long as she need not abandon them. Better a piece of broken slate to represent the hearthrug than have no hearthrug on the floor. The whole amounts to a slavish but most barbarous copy of her home. It is all very pretty, and she will spend priceless hours in these surroundings, setting the table with her little scraps of china, dusting her unresponsive rooms or shaking out a hearthrug that is hopelessly inflexible. And she generally has a keen desire to display her ingenuity and will gladly ask you to take a hand in the game.

The boy also has his houses, but they are secret and remote, and, far from being like his home, they must present, if possible, abnormal and eccentric features. He revels in a house on wheels, a house underground or on the water, a house of snow or a house of branches, a house in the face of a cliff or a house in a tree—anything, indeed, but a house of stone built four-square upon the ground, though even that might be permissible if it could only be approached by crawling tortuously. For it is a point of no small importance that it should be difficult—if

possible, dangerous—to come at, and bereft of any sort of common comfort in its mysterious inside.

I see now the reason of the failure of our cabin-in-the-woods, though at the time I could not understand it. It was because some of these prime conditions had been ruthlessly transgressed. Archie, who had strong architectural leanings, conceived the notion of building it, and Authority smiled upon the undertaking. At first one looked upon it with that robust contempt which belonged to the enterprises of a younger brother. But ere long one was induced to lend a hand. And really he put it up with no little skill, and, working manfully for most of the daylight hours of a long holiday, completed, tarred and locked it with a key. It was a neat, small structure of rough planks, finely weatherproof, fitted with a table, a cupboard, and a bed, and pleasantly situated among the gorse bushes in the corner of the Field Below. It was indeed all that a house should be—and that was where it failed. I am convinced that had it had some outrageous feature, had it been set on piles in a swamp, or even had it been less painfully sound and capable all would have been well. But as it

was we had no heart in it. It languished from the first, and ere a couple of years had passed it was made over (as a hen-house) to Tom Coachman, who tore it up and bore it home to his back garden, where it may still be seen, filling a useful, if degraded, office.

When first the rage for house-hunting set in, any sort of cavity or burrow would serve the purpose. We rejoiced in many queer retreats where we found splendid isolation. There were camps among the rhododendrons in the shrubbery. (A "camp" was a sort of lair, shut in by dense branches and arched over by trees, where one could peer out and catch a glimpse of passers-by—all unseen and unsuspected.) There was the stokehole beside the melon-house, a retreat of most grateful memory, where you would shut down the lid above your head and lie upon heaped coke before the glowing fire, and the footsteps of your hereditary enemies—Callers—might even pass—it *has* happened—over your crouching head and they be none the wiser. There was a glorious little den in the quarry on The Green-Hill-Far-Away.

I have lost all zest for these pursuits. Camps and stokeholes are naught to me now, but I still

look back with lively interest and regret upon our house in the old holm-oak. That was by far our happiest inspiration. The others had their day and were deserted one by one, but the tree-house met a tragic end while it still stood high in our affections. Had it not been for a miserable scheme that was set on foot for enlarging the tennis lawn it might well have lasted out our time. For the old holm-oak with its precious burden had to go.

The house was poised at a height where no Grown-up would ever dare to climb, and so slender were the branches among which it rested that it swung with thrilling motion in the wind. But it was firmly fixed with stout ropes and stays to every available limb, and built into its position like a nest. The floor was made of an old door discarded from a former potting-shed, and when once it had been placed—a risky and laborious process—the superstructure was soon nailed on. Walls and roof were made of a variety of collected materials—canvas, felt and carpet—and the whole front was in the form of a flap which folded up. All things are a matter of proportion, and it is probable that its dizzy altitude was not more than thirty feet from the ground. But it was



almost completely hidden by surrounding leaves.

And if I am asked what we did in the many hours we spent in it, I find myself completely at a loss. I fancy that to be in it at all was in itself a sufficient occupation. There were books carried up to it that we never opened, pencils and paint-boxes that were never used. Curiously, one generally went up alone, or if there was more than one conversation often languished. One really had no time to spare for that. To be there, swaying gently with the branches, looking out upon a bewildering world of green, watching the birds that came and went, or peering down at the little patchwork scraps of the garden, of flower-beds, gravel, or smooth-shaven lawn that were picked out by the sun between the leaves; it was enough. Best of all to be there in a heavy shower of rain, in the very heart of the pattering musketry of the myriad drops. I know the charm and fascination of it all had taken so complete possession of me that I would rise day after day at six in the morning that I might have two extra hours before others were awake to sit and dream far up among the branches.

We never built another house when the old

tree had to go ; soon, indeed, we had arrived at an age when tree-houses are of no more avail. But I doubt if in any of the many camping, caravanning, sleeping-out enterprises of my later life I have ever quite caught again that which was lost on that most fateful day. I still dream of a house in a tree that I shall build myself some day, deep in a forest and poised above a stream, and of hours that I shall spend there in the Spring, alone, well pleased with this old occupation of doing nothing with a pure content.

## XXVIII

### *SCORING OFF*

It was at one time a favourite matter of discussion in the nursery whether it was correct to say "I scored him off," or "I scored off him." There was a strong party in favour of the former on the ground of emphasis, while the latter was supported by the more pedantic, who had begun to take an interest in grammar. Fortunately the point did not often arise, for there could be no question about the construction of the phrase in its most common form when it was used as a signal of victory and a pæan of triumph in the exultant shout of "Scored off!"

This was one of the leading practices of those distant days, for there was simply no end to the methods in which one might be scored off. It was less a state of continuous warfare, than a game of give-and-take, a matter of reprisals, of the balancing of accounts, of knowing oneself to be "one up." It did not entail much ill-feeling,

and I am sure that the distress of the Scored-off was never by any means commensurate with the deep joy of the Scorer. But you were bound to take a hand in the game if you would not lose your position among your fellows and sink into insignificance and contempt. For to be scored off—as was Cousin Herbert—without resentment and without any attempt to retaliate was to stamp yourself as no sportsman. It was exactly equivalent to the miserable practice of giving up a game before it was finished because you were losing ; and even Those in Authority, perceiving its iniquity, had made a special regulation against that. And the beauty of it was that this charming practice permeated every department of our lives.

For if Archie by bagging the common hair-brush and thereafter chucking it behind the chest of drawers was able to get down in the morning in time for prayers, while you were late and were reprimanded therefor, it was a *score-off*—though rather a poor one. If he got the top of the cream for his porridge by reaching the breakfast table first it was a solid and substantial *score-off* for you. If you could make him late for school by hiding his boots you felt, of course, that you had got level and could start again on even terms.

These examples belong to the simplest and most straightforward type, along with the Apple Pie Bed and the Booby Trap. Working on the same lines, one would secrete unpleasant substances in the victim's pocket or remove his chair when he was on the point of sitting down. These were all useful in their way, but none of them could be regarded as first-class. A really powerful score-off, and one which brought with it a full sense of satisfaction, must be more subtle. It must be a triumph of wit. This came chiefly into operation in the successful prognostication of events, the discovery of secrets or the vindication of an opinion. For there was nothing in which one showed more vigour and tenacity than in forming an opinion and sticking to it. If I had once said that Aunt Mary was coming to tea on Friday it was useless trying to argue me out of the statement or to convince me that Thursday was the day. There was probably much violent contention as to who was in the right, but all attempt at persuasion was wholly barren. And when at last the old lady turned up on Wednesday it only remained to decide which of the two competitors could consider himself the more completely scored off.



To have discovered some new and startling fact was in itself an open challenge which would be taken up, often against great odds, almost automatically. If I (having perceived among the parcels on the hall table one of peculiar shape and skilfully put two and two together) had surmised and announced that Archie was going to get a cricket-bat for a birthday present on the morrow, some one would be quite certain to deny it without going through the formality of asking the grounds of my conclusion. The debate would begin with an unprofitable interchange on the basis of "He is" and "He isn't," but before long a diversion would be caused by some one suggesting an alternative, say a pair of stilts (then much in vogue). After that there was not much more to be said, though that did not prevent us from saying much ; it only remained to be seen which of us was scored off. But when the time came our sympathetic interest in Archie's acquisition would be quite submerged in our eagerness to learn the result of the dispute.

But the most tremendous and effective triumphs were those in which an important piece of information was being hoarded up and used as a weapon by its possessor, and was discovered by a

competitor and published in spite of him. After persuasion, pressure, threats had all failed, and he still refused to tell the name of the new governess (which he had overheard), the formula was "I don't care" (which was palpably untrue), "I'll find out in spite of you!" And if one did find out and made public proclamation of the intelligence at nursery tea, with what splendid force did one drive home one's victory in the brief and withering peroration "Scored off!"

And that reminds me that the most elaborate and overwhelming score-off was perpetrated by the new governess, who rose by reason of it to staggering heights in our estimation. For we recognized that this was a level of the art far beyond our own clumsy efforts, to be kept before us for weeks to come as a glowing example. She had told Sidney and Colin (who were to be her pupils) that the following morning they would *come into the schoolroom between one and two, without knowing it*. It was an evening of great excitement. Was it true? If so, how could she bring it about? Was it thought-reading or somnambulism? Or a horrid thing called Hypnotism that Colin said he had heard about? . . .

Nothing remarkable happened during the

night, when we all slept as usual. But that proved nothing. For they were to do it "without knowing it." At 9 a.m. Miss Gardener arrived and found us waiting in force in the schoolroom to demand an explanation. She took us to the door and pointed out where she had written the figure 1 upon one side of it and 2 upon the other. It dawned upon us. Sidney and Colin, without knowing it, had come in between one and two!

And that *was* a score-off!

## XXIX

### *A STRANGE TONGUE*

THE new language was much the most sweeping and adventurous of our many literary experiments. Long before that we had dealt largely in codes and secret cyphers. There was that system of hieroglyphics which was employed for sending messages by string and pulley from second storey windows to the garden below. It was altogether successful in its main object—that is to say, it must have baffled the investigations of the enemy, had any of the messages fallen into his hands. (The fact that they never did, and that indeed there was no enemy need not detain us.) But it also had an annoying faculty for baffling the painful researches of the receiving correspondent himself. At least he must take his message away to the summer-house, get out his key and put his whole mind into it if he would succeed in making it out. Every letter of the

alphabet had a sign of its own. The thing was built up by a daring combination of the face of a clock with sundry diagrams out of the first book of Euclid, which—not having as yet been included in the dreary category of “lessons”—appealed to us directly by their native charm. But we were always in difficulties. The draftsmanship was defective: the number of segments of the clock which could be mutually distinguished was not very great, and one triangle, unless it be most carefully transcribed, is pretty like another. Messages became more and more terse and laconic and the time came when it was not considered quite sporting to send more than a single word. The difficulty of expressing oneself adequately in a single word again called forth an extensive code, in which one syllable represented a whole sentence. After that we were fairly happy for a time—though there was necessarily some monotony in our communications. But when some one pointed out that there was now no need for the cypher, as the code word itself conveyed a hidden meaning, we felt that the whole system had broken down under the weight of its own complexity and instantly abandoned it. Indeed



there was a very strong revulsion of feeling. The very suggestion of a secret code was regarded with contempt. And when Archie was found, a whole week later, trying to concoct a new one he was very promptly suppressed. One certainly had, in those old days, the faculty for breaking off short and starting again. There were no loose ends and things did not drag on out of their due season. When we had done with a thing, we *had* done with it. We were not given to raking up the past.

Then, of course, we published a newspaper. It began as a Daily, but the trouble about a daily newspaper, as we soon found, is simply that it appears every day. So we altered that. It then had a brief and rather distinguished career as a Weekly, until, under pressure of an active period of frost and snow—when our energies were fully occupied—it hastily announced its intention of coming out in future on the first of every month. We had hoped to keep it on its legs for a time as a Quarterly, but it was not long before we were referring to it as the “Annual.” Even then we were hampered by a sense of that terrible and machine-like regularity which attaches to a periodical; and the last number of

all bore the inscription "Published whenever the Editor feels inclined"—a state of affairs which never again occurred.

The death of the paper was hastened by the fact that by that time we were all becoming engrossed in authorship, as opposed to journalism. But a greater project awaited us. So far we had merely been aping the achievements of other men. Anyone could publish a rotten newspaper or write a silly book, or make up a beastly code, we told each other. We felt the need of a new field that belonged to us alone. This whole question of language and intercommunication was, if you came to think of it, horribly stale. Why should we be condemned to converse in the same terms as Grown-up People? Could we not among ourselves find a better way, which should shut us off from the generality of mankind? The idea was comforting in itself and also it pointed to possible distinction. Already we could hear outsiders in tramcars remarking to one another when we entered, "Oh, yes, those are the children that don't talk English." The only question was—how was it to be done? A day was set apart, as an experiment, on which we would communicate only by signs. That was

a strange, sad, unsatisfactory day. It was as if a shadow had descended upon us, and it was small comfort to be told in the evening by Those in Authority that it had been quite a pleasure to have us about the house and that it was a long time since we had been so good. And the system broke down hopelessly. Archie lost his temper altogether when his efforts to communicate the fact that he had seen tadpoles in the pit were construed by me into a request for the loan of my knife. So that was no good. Very well, only one course remained. We must make a new language.

We held a very serious and immensely important meeting on the question in the stable loft. We agreed that we had been forced into it, that there was no other way. We admitted that at first sight it appeared a big undertaking—we did not wish to underrate it. We were prepared for the necessary sacrifices of time and thought and energy ; and we had no doubt whatever that we could carry it through. We should get pretty sick of it perhaps, still there must be no slackness, until the work was completed. We estimated, not without awe, that it would take up nine half-holidays.

That afternoon we converted the stable loft into an office, provided one pencil each, and pen and ink for the fair copy, a large roll of drawer paper for rough manuscript, and a penny exercise book for the completed dictionary. And so we set to work. Every word was to have a new formation : it was to be a word that had not been used before : there were to be no tenses, conjugations, numbers, genders, nor any parts of speech. It was a perfectly straightforward proposition. We were simply to enter up all the words that we were ever likely to use which began with A, find equivalents for them, and then on to B, and so on.

It went swimmingly the first day. Down they went—APPLE, ANIMAL, AIRGUN and ABERDEEN. We thought of no less than twenty-seven, and being then satisfied that we had exhausted the subject, we took it in turns to allot new words to them. It was wonderful to observe how quickly we got on—BIM, SPICK, SPROT. . . . “ You must remember that it will take you fellows some time to learn this language,” remarked the scribe, as he closed the book for the day. “ But at any rate we’ve finished A.”

The real trouble was that there were omissions.



At the second meeting, which should have been devoted to B, it was pointed out that we had so far no verbs, and we had to go back upon the old ground, which was disappointing. However, we made some headway. At the third sitting the list for both the first letters of the alphabet was found to be terribly defective and, after a very lively session, we began to lighten the ship. "We'll have to chuck out adjectives," said the scribe. "We can easily get on without adjectives." Archie developed a perverse ingenuity in thinking up words that had been forgotten, even then. We had to be continually harking back. The meetings became disorderly, and the attendance fell off. But it was not so much the magnitude of the task that killed the language, it was the sheer lack of new words of which to build it up. Before we had come to the end of C, it was quite impossible to invent one that had not done service before, without running to four or five syllables. We would sit round, furiously racking unresponsive brains. That wretched English language seemed to have bagged them all. Then it came to light that we had already used the same word—PAPE, I think it was—for AUTUMN, BOOK, and BABY, and when Sidney, the scribe,



heroic to the last, decided to distinguish them by accents, the whole enterprise came down with a crash.

That was the end of it, and we were never given to raking up the past.

### XXX

#### *WHAT TO BE*

WE were not allowed to talk in bed. And really, on looking back, it is very difficult at first to imagine when we did find time for any conversation, in the era of perpetual motion. Every day was a sort of headlong scramble, from the moment when one tumbled—or was flung—out of bed till the light was taken away in the evening and we were left to compose ourselves for sleep. Seldom did one sit still long enough to talk, except at meals when one was otherwise occupied. There was always too much to be seen from the top of a tram or out of a railway carriage window. One was in far too great a hurry on the way to school and too actively exuberant, in the joy of one's recovered freedom, on the way back. And yet there is no doubt that a good deal of talking was wedged in somewhere. There were moments of reflection after all, contemplative moods, occasions for discussion, argument and debate.

Perhaps it would be a November evening in the last half-hour before tea, when Old John Gardener had heaped up a great smouldering fire of fallen leaves which filled the whole garden with their sweet, earthy, choking smoke, redolent of autumn, of intimate, domestic things, of the time of year for gathering in about the hearth. There on an upturned flowerpot beside the glowing fire or in a wheelbarrow (there is no more delightful lounge than a wheelbarrow) one might be content to sit munching an apple and talk awhile. Or perhaps it would be on a still summer afternoon, in the dazzling sunshine among the tumbled hay, sprawling with a cap drawn over one's eyes, that one found a fit occasion for debate. At such times there was one subject above all that gripped our attention, that ran on perennially with unflagging interest, that was never out of place—*What we would like to be.*

Growing up was still a remote contingency. We looked forward to that strange, shadowy future state, like an undiscovered land beyond the mountains, not with any eagerness or desire to enter in. I think we regarded it rather as a necessary misfortune and our speculations (as to the part that we should play) chiefly as a means

of making the best of it, when the time should come. Tremendous vistas were opened up, but the whole thing was like a fairy tale, remote and quite unreal. One could not definitely imagine oneself grown-up any more than one could imagine oneself a horse or a dog. And thus there was a very close affinity between the two variants of the discussion. What will you be when you grow up? and What would you like to be here and now?

We soon came to a deadlock over the second question, however, simply because, generally speaking, everyone wanted to be a Squirrel and it was difficult to decide who had bagged it first. If anyone could really lay claim to that idea and succeed in reserving it for himself, it was sometimes possible to take some interest in other less attractive rôles. Birds were generally popular, and Archie (whose ideas were never nice) often declared, in the teeth of opposition, that he would like to be a Rat. To do him justice he had no special hankering after living the daily life of the rat. What he wanted was to discover, and establish beyond dispute, just what you came to when you followed up the little tunnel that ran into the bank from the hole beneath the pantry

window, and whether it had any connection with the manhole in the yard. The only person he had ever seen who used that route was a rat. My little sister on one occasion struck a new note. She had been gazing dreamily into the heavens and when the question was put to her she announced, without a trace of hesitation or delay, that she would like to be a cloud. But we were not at all sure about that. It sounded rather as if it might have come out of a book. Sooner or later the thought of the swaying branches and the depths of greenery, of clever, dainty patterings along dizzy tracks and wild leaps from tree to tree would drive out all other imaginings. And so we got back to the squirrel. It came to this. If we couldn't be a squirrel we would stay just as we were.

On the other question—of our future state and profession—there was far more diversity of opinion. I sometimes wonder if we ever for a moment expected to carry out the intentions that we so clearly expressed. It is probable that one never anticipated becoming a Plumber any more seriously than one anticipated becoming a Squirrel. It was a pure exercise of the imagination in either case. What one wanted to do was



to picture oneself playing a part and living a life. We were immensely obsessed with this vital question. It seemed to us of the very first importance. If you could not or would not say what you meant to be, you were wilfully concealing an important aspect of yourself from your fellows. If you didn't *know* what you meant to be you were simply contemptible. It was almost as bad as not knowing how old you were. Thus when a stranger was introduced to our circle—which of course we resented—after the two preliminary questions of his name and age there followed at once, simply to complete the introduction, the demand: "What are you going to be when you grow up?" His future treatment depended to no small extent upon his reply to that.

Of course we were continually revising our intentions and adopting new professions. It would have been no fun if we had remained constant to an ideal. And there were times when one simply could not make up one's mind. When I had finished with the plumber (having seen the home, in a back street, of my friend Mr. Pearce and found it not at all to my taste) I was for some weeks torn in two between the rival claims of a couple of professions, or perhaps I should say

callings—both of which struck me as being hugely desirable. I was determined to be either a Missionary or a Smuggler. My eldest brother wanted to be a Lamp-lighter, for in those days there was a poetic figure which flitted by every evening about dusk with a long twinkling pole over his shoulder. I would have been a lamp-lighter myself I think had there been no other in the family.

We had strong leanings towards the rarer and more unusual classes of labour. Bill-stickers, Sandwich-men, Hawkers all had their run of popularity. I think we rather prided ourselves on not wanting to be Sailors, because that seemed to be expected of us. There was once an uncle who had asked the vital question and gone on with a disgraceful levity to add “A Sailor, I suppose? Run away to sea, eh?” Colin was the most consistent. He was going to work a magic-lantern and nothing would shake him from his purpose.

Well do I remember the day when Sidney, who had begun to go to school—real boarding school—came home for the holidays with an entirely new answer to the riddle. We felt at once that it was the beginning of the end. For when on

the first evening he was asked the familiar question, he told us, in an off-hand manner, that he was going to be a Cotton Broker (he had gone away only three months before a confirmed Lion Tamer) and the announcement was most coldly received. It was clear that he had somehow lost the proper atmosphere of the game. That could hardly be a pure leap of the imagination: there was a taint of deliberate intention about it. . . . Was it possible that he would really grow up to be a Cotton Broker?

I have only to add that he did.

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